



RESEARCH ARTICLE

AN EXPLORATION OF LANGUAGE USE BY PRE-PRIMARY SCHOOL LEARNERS IN NIGERIA

\*Arit Okonobong Atakpa

School of Early Childhood Education and Development, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

At the pre-primary school level in Nigeria, different languages are being used as the medium of instruction. It was observed that while learners in a particular school adopt language of immediate community, another one in another location use English language to learn. On the basis this that the languages use by pre-primary school learners in Nigeria was conceived. Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory was used to understand the study under investigation. Qualitative approach was adopted. This was followed by interpretive paradigm. Eight teachers with a sound knowledge of pre-primary education were purposively selected. Semi-interview question was developed to gather information from the teachers. The data was subjected to thematic analysis. From the study, it was revealed that teachers used language of immediate community, mother tongue and English language to teach in the pre-primary school. Additionally, that language was used to identify, present, discuss on object in the class and also development of literacy skills of the children.

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INTRODUCTION

The earliest word made by a new born child consists of babbling and other types of non-verbal sounds, some of which are used to attract attention, to engage in imitative play, and to take part in games during the first year of life (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2015). The vocabulary grows gradually at first- at 12 months an average child has a vocabulary of between two and three words, at 24 months it has approximately 154, at 36 months it knows 2500 words (Karmiloff *et al.*, 2009). At the same time children learn how to combine words into grammatical sentences that form a structure of meanings in which the words are related. However, the meanings of words are at first very vague and inaccurate, but greater elaboration and depth of meanings develops with time and as a result of listening and asking questions (Mampe *et al.*, 2009). According to Wolff (2000), language develops slowly and gradually for children in pre-schools, perhaps because the children are rewarded less for using it and more rapidly at home, probably because of their greater association with parents (Ball, 2010). Wolff (2000) argues that language acquisition is faster for the children of more educated parents than those from uneducated. The reason advanced for the faster acquisition of language is based on the exposure of children from educated parents to availability of educative toys. In children, much early sound takes the form of monologues that accompany action which helps to control behaviour (Im-Bolter *et al.*, 2006).

\*Corresponding author: Arit Okonobong Atakpa,  
School of Early Childhood Education and Development, University of  
KwaZulu-Natal, Nigeria

From Wolff's (2000) perspective, this is most common at the ages between two and four. A great deal of speech when others are present is 'egocentric' because the child does not put his/herself in the position of the listener, or worry too much about whether the message is being received. However, at some point middle childhood speech becomes more 'sociocentric'-the child addresses his/her hearer, considers his/her point of view and also tries to influence him/her, or actually exchange ideas with him/her (Ronkainen, 2017). In recent time, due to unclear language policy at the pre-primary school level in Nigeria, teachers at this level of education are compel to use different language to teach the children. In light of the above, this study seeks to explore the language use by pre-primary school learners in Nigeria.

Conceptualisation of early childhood education

The concept 'Early Childhood Education' (ECE) as it known in Nigeria is referred to as Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Republic of China. It is also called Early Childhood Development in Tanzania and South Africa. In United States of America, this phase of education is known as Early Childhood Education. In spite of the array of names given to this level of education by different countries, I would say that it is a kind of education which children receive during the early stage of their childhood. According to Maduewesi (1999), early childhood education is the type of education which is designed for children who have not yet reached the statutory age of beginning primary education. Furthermore, Heward (2009) argues that it is a semi-formal education arrangement, usually

outside home whereby a young child from age of three years are exposed through play-like activities in a group setting to mental, social and physical learning suited to their developmental stages, until the mandatory age of government approved formal schooling. From the perspective of National Policy of Education (2004), an early childhood education (pre-primary education) is an education given in an educational institution to children between the ages of three and five prior to their enrolment in the conventional primary school.

### **A brief history of early childhood education in Nigeria**

It is undisputable fact that an organised system of education for children below primary school age did not receive official recognition until recently. However, what appeared like early childhood education were infant schools introduced by the missionaries in the early 20th century. Early Childhood education or pre-primary education as it is called today in Nigeria is fundamentally a post-colonial development. According to Sooter (2013), the likeness of this kind of education during the colonial period was known as the Kindergarten which consisted of children considered not yet ready physically, mentally and linguistically for primary education. With the attainment of Nigerian independence in 1960 and the introduction of National policy on Education in 1977, Kindergarten schools were phased out and it was subsequently replaced by pre-primary education (Tor- Anyiin, 2008). Sooter (2013) opines that it was in 1977 with the introduction of National Policy on Education that the importance and need for early childhood education was given official government attention. Nowadays, pre-primary schools are sited in various villages, towns and cities in Nigeria. As at 2016, there are 1.2 million registered pre-primary schools in Nigeria (National Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

### **The objectives of pre-primary education in Nigeria**

In Nigeria, the objectives of pre-primary according to NPE (2004, p.9) are as follows:

- To ensure and effect a smooth transition or movement from home to school
- To prepare all children for the primary level education in Nigeria,
- To provide standard security, care, and supervision for children thereby building a firm foundation for a better citizenry for the nation while their parents are at work,
- To build in every child social and moral values which makes the core of the society,
- To improve on the desire for creativity, and enquiry instilled or honed in the child at the ECCDE level and ensure that the passion for excellence and lifelong learning is sustained through the exploration of the environment or art forms like; music, dance, drama, etc.,
- To build on and enhance the team spirit as well as cooperative skills developed at the ECCDE level or instil it afresh in those who did not attend the ECCDE, thereby enhancing the quality of experience they would have in the primary school,
- To enhance the knowledge of good habits especially good health habits in children who already have (in this case those who attended the ECCDE) or stimulate the development of such in every child to ensure the moralisation of the future society, and

- To instil in children basic ideas or skills of numeracy, writing, and literacy for their development in the primary school.

From all indications, these laudable objectives are capable of transforming this sector of education if properly implemented. In Nigeria, whether the objectives are tenable is debatable.

### **Objectives of the study**

Inexploring the language application in pre-primary schools in Nigeria, It is pertinent to shed some light on the type of language use by pre-primary schools learners. In light of the above, this study, therefore, seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- To examine the language pre-primary school learners adopt for learning.
- To examine the impact of language on pre-primary school learners' learning.

### **Questions to be asked**

Based on the research objectives stated above, the following key research questions are developed to guide the study. The questions are as follows:

- What language does pre-primary school learners adopt for learning?
- How does language impact pre-primary school learners' learning?

### **Theoretical framing**

In this study, I intend to adopt the Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of human learning of 1978. Vygotsky's theory looks at learning as a social process and the origination of human intelligence in the culture or society. In other words, Vygotsky (1978) argues that human beings do not act directly on the physical world without the intermediary of tools. Here, the tools from the Vygotsky's point of view are artefacts created by human beings under specific cultural and historical conditions, and as such they carry with them the characteristics of the culture in question (Lantolf, 2000). Furthermore, Vygotsky (1978) reiterated that a child is absolutely dependent on other people such as the parents or teachers who initiate the child's actions by instructing him/her as to what to do, how to do it, as well as what not to do (Turuk, 2008). The teachers or parents, as representatives of the culture and the channel in which the culture passes into the child, actualise these instructions predominantly through language (Turuk, 2008). In a similar vein, Wertsch (1991) opine that at the first step, the child acquires knowledge through contacts and interactions with people in the society, thereafter assimilates and internalises the knowledge by adding his/her personal value to it. This theory is used to unpack the language learners in pre-primary school use in Nigeria.

### **Qualitative research methodology**

In this study, I adopt qualitative approach as the general research methodology. The reason for the choice of the qualitative is informed by the nature of the study under investigation. In other words, this approach is thought to be most suitable because it allowed me to develop in-depth

accounts of the language learners in pre-primary school use in Nigeria. In line with qualitative approach adopted, this study is guided by the interpretive approach which is concerned with the meaning making and strives to comprehend the subjective world of human experience (Bailey, 2007; Cohen *et al.*, 2011). According to Mayoh and Onwuegbuzie (2015), interpretive paradigm is based on the premise that human beings create meaning in their worlds and the meaning is socially constructed as a result of interaction with others. As mentioned earlier, I adopted a qualitative approach which is mainly concerned with understanding the lived experiences of the participants' worlds and meaning they make of that experience from their perspective as they experience the problem in a real-life situation (Merriam, 2007). In furtherance to the adoption of interpretive approach and in order to address the key research questions stated above, I adopted a case study design. My aim is to understand holistically the language learners in pre-primary school use in the classroom. In this study, purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants who are knowledgeable and informative about the language pre-primary school learners' use. This sampling method was relevant for the study. This is because I wanted teachers with comprehensive knowledge and experience in teaching to give detail explanation of study under investigation. I decided to purposively select six pre-primary schools located in six geopolitical areas of Nigeria. The sample size consisted of eight female teachers. The reason for choosing a particular gender is because, from my observation the majority of academic staff at the pre-primary schools in Nigeria are women. The choices of the schools were based on the number of teachers who are willing to participate in the study. Furthermore, teachers' experiences and expertise in teaching pre-primary school also played a crucial role in the choice of the participants. In this study, however, semi-structured individual interviews which consist of ten open ended questions were appropriate techniques used in the gathering of the data. During the interviews session, I made use of tape recorder for the recording of the conversations with my participants. Furthermore, I also made use of field notes to take down some important points raised by my participants. After all, Phillippi and Lauderdale (2017) argue that field notes play a crucial role in connecting researchers and their subjects in the writing of an ethnographic study.

### Data analysis method

In the qualitative research, data analysis involves aiming to uncover and /or understand the big picture by using the data to describe the phenomenon and its meaning (Thorne, 2000). Scholars such as Charmaz (2006), Corbin and Strauss (2008), Friese (2014), Creswell and Poth (2017) argue that data analysis begins when a researcher is on the field. In line the above argument, I want to state categorically that I selected relevant information needed for the study. The data collected in the field were transcribed and subjected to an open coding. The themes that emerged from the open opening were analysed using thematic analysis.

### Research findings and discussion

The findings of the first research question indicated that teachers used language of immediate community, mother tongue and English language to teach in the pre-primary school in Nigeria.

These are explained below.

### Adoption of language of immediate community

From the data analysis, all the teachers interviewed said that the language of immediate community is adopted by the children to teach at the pre-primary school level. For instance, MrsBassey reported that children between the ages of two and four years are taught in language of immediate community. When I asked her what she meant by language of immediate community, Mrs Bassey replied;

*The language of immediate community is the language in which majority of the people living in a particular community use both in communication and conducting business activities. In fact, it is a language commonly used by the inhabitants (parents and teachers inclusive) of particular geographical area (interview, 2016).*

In addition to MrsBassey's view, Mrs Pricilla reported that most children learn by adopting a particular language spoken by the generality of the people living in a particular geographical space. Mrs Pricilla went further to say that a child from birth can come from particular geographical area, but live in another geographical location, he/she should be able to learn through the language spoken in that geographical location in which he/she lives. In affirming Mrs Pricilla's assertion, MrsIboro cited an example from few children who lives in her neighbourhood. She said that these children originally come from Ondo state where Yoruba language is spoken, but because the children's parents live in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State where Ibibio language is spoken, they were not only able to communicate in Ibibio, but they used Ibibio as official languageto learn in the class. Similarly, Mrs Alice stated that in most cases children learn from the language of immediate community as stated in the official government document (National Policy on Education (NPE) of 2004). According to Alice, the concept 'language of immediate community' is defined in the official government policy document (NPE). However, it is our wisdom to look at language of immediate community in the context of dominant language spoken in the village, town, city or state in which a school is located. On the second thought, MrsAlice reported that the adoption of language of immediate community is only practicable in the rural and semi urban schools where about 99% of children attending these schools are from the area. In the rural and semi urban schools, there is uniformity on the language spoken by the children attending these schools. This is because they all come from the same geographical area where the school is located. As a result, they are able to learn the common language spoken by the community. Notwithstanding the view expressed by Mrs Alice, Mrs Patience reported that though children learn effectively using the language which is commonly spoken by the community, she added that the situation is quite different in urban schools where children from different ethnic nationalities with their own language converged in the school. Mrs Gloria declared:

*It is very common for children to learn in the language of immediate community if they the school is located in rural or semi-urban areas, this is because in such areas all the children speak the same language. But the situation is entirely different in the urban schools where children come from various ethnic groups. These children speak different languages in schools, therefore, to learn in the language of immediate community become entirely impracticable (interview, August, 2017).*

In furtherance to the above, Mrs Louisa said:

*I want to tell you that even some us teachers in these schools find it difficult to communicate with these children, this is because of the various languages spoken in the class (interview, 2017).*

From the above narrative, it has been asserted that children in pre-primary education adopted language of their immediate community to learn. The language of immediate community, from my own interpretation, is the language commonly and widely spoken by the community where the children reside. From my interpretative perspective, children irrespective of where they come from are able to communicate with each other through socialisation such as play, games, among others. Through this socialisation process, children are able to speak and learn through the language of immediate community. Apparently, this might be the reason children easily understand and learn in the language of immediate community than their parents. The fact that majority of my participants accepted the assertion that children adopted language of immediate community to learn, however, there was another school of thought that objected to this notion. Minority of the participants revealed that the children can only adopt language of immediate community if they live or attend schools in the rural or semi-urban areas. This is because in such areas there is only one language spoken. However, in the urban areas where children from various ethnic groups co-habits, this is practically impossible. The children find it difficult to learn in the language of immediate community because of diverse languages spoken. In other words, the children speak various languages based on where they come from. It can also be argued that children who come from different ethnic groups and speak language different from the one spoken by the people they live with, in no distant time the children are able to learn with the language of the immediate community. Here, the Zone of Proximal Development allows these children to be pulled forward in their language abilities with the aid of the people from the community or a more knowledgeable person in the community. Additionally, Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development call for the withdrawal of the typical demonstration method of teaching and allows children to become involved in the learning process and internalise one another's actions to reach a higher level than they would have previously (Schmittau, 2004). Furthermore, through Vygotsky's (1978) scaffolding, a person may give tasks that structure interactions between the children or children and adult members of the community, this trigger conversation which allow children to participate in activities that might be too difficult.

### **Adoption of mother tongue language**

The issue of mother tongue also featured prominently as the language adopted by the children at the pre-primary school level during my conversation with all the participants. Mrs Louisa was of the opinion that the child of about a year old begins to talk by imitating the language spoken by the parents. She went on to say that most times the language spoken by the parents is the mother tongue. I was compelled to ask Mrs Louisa what she understood by the concept 'mother tongue.' In response, she said:

*My understanding of 'mother tongue' is, it is the language that children learn and speak first after birth through their parents at home (Interview, 2017).*

Mrs Louisa added that as the name implies, this language which is commonly spoken either by the mother or father or anybody the child spends his/her first two years with after birth. In a similar circumstance, Mrs Alice looked at mother tongue in the context of a native language spoken by the generality of the family members in the house. From her position, mother tongue language is the language which indicates the child's ethnic group. For instance, a child who speaks Yoruba or Ibibio language at home is an indication that he/she is from Yoruba or Ibibio ethnic group. Based on Mrs Alice's narrative, I was forced to interrogate further by asking, supposing the child's father comes from one of ethnic group which speaks a different language and the mother comes from another ethnic group which speaks another language, and the child speaks these two languages fluently based on their exposure, which of the languages can be regarded as mother tongue language. In response, Mrs Alice declared:

*It is obvious that at home, mothers speak their native language with their children than fathers. This is because the fathers are not always very close to the children like their mothers. Fathers spend most of their time outside only to come back late at night, while mothers at all times spend time with their children. Therefore, the mothers' language becomes a dominant one in which the children adopted for learning both at home and school (interview, 2017).*

The quotation above indicated that children born to parents from different ethnic backgrounds though may speak the two languages spoken by the parents. However, the children adopt their mothers' native language as their first language because of the closeness to their mothers. It was further established that due to fathers' absence from home, children seem to rarely speak their fathers' native language. This, invariably, make the children to learn through their mothers' native language which in other words is the mother tongue. Further, MrsEno reported that aside from the fact that children between the ages of two and four adopted mother tongue to learn both at home and in school, the language also enhances traditional culture and national heritage through the preservation and valuing of the indigenous identities. MrsEno reiterated that children understand good morals when they learn in their mother tongue. MrsEno avowed:

*When the children learn Bible Knowledge using mother tongue as a language of instruction, they understand the importance of the moral values embedded in it which they emulate (interview, 2017).*

Mrs Pricilla also expressed her mind as follows:

*The richness in Yoruba culture can only be learnt and understood in Yorubalanguage; therefore, this would make the children to be responsible citizens in future (interview, 2017).*

From the narrative, it has been revealed that the richness of a particular culture cannot be appreciated outside of its language. This is because the meanings and connotations of words, phrases, idioms and proverbs cannot be easily translated to other languages. For instance, Yoruba as a language of instruction assists the children to increase their cognitive comprehension of the subject matter. In addition, it aids the children to identify the differences in the alphabets when they compare it with the English language alphabet. In furtherance to the above narrative, Mrs Gloria said that there are certain

songs, plays, idioms and proverbs that are better understood when expressed in the mother tongue. Mrs Gloria explained:

*Children learn certain important societal values through songs, plays, dance, idioms and proverbs. I want to say Ibibio songs and dance connotes much information about Ibibio culture and traditions (interview, 2017).*

Mrs Patience added that to make the children to learn in their mother tongue is a thing of joy to all of us, this is because we (the teachers) will be able to communicate and explain effectively on certain topics which are difficult for the children to either pronounced or understood in English language. Moreover, this immensely assists the slow learners in the class to learn at their own pace. Similarly, Mrs Alice reported that when children are taught in their mother tongue, it promotes the integration of people's culture into the school curriculum, which invariably provides a culturally sensitive curriculum hence making the children to develop a positive perception towards their culture. Additionally, Mrs Bassey maintained that mother tongue is an essential educational pedagogy that enables the children to build a better basic cognitive ability which facilitate faster acquisition of second language.

Mrs Bassey maintained:

*Let me tell you that when a child learns in mother tongue, he/she will easily understand the basic concepts and meanings in the language. This ultimately will help the child to learn the second language since most languages has similar pronunciation (interview, 2017).*

From the above narratives, it was indicated that songs, dance, idioms and proverbs when expressed in the mother tongue positively align the children with their culture and tradition. Children from a particular ethnic group could rightly claim their roots if they are able to demonstrate mastery of their language. In other words, children's ability to communicate effectively in their first or mother tongue connects them to their different ethnic groups and also assist them in shaping their identities. From all indications, it is an aberration in some ethnic groups in Nigeria when their children do not speak and learn in their mother tongue. Elders of these ethnic groups regard such children as outcast and uneducated. Here, an educated child is measured on the ability of the child to speak, write and read in his/her mother tongue. Obviously, this might be the reason *Efik* adage say 'speak your mother tongue and let me tell you which ethnic group you come from.' In furtherance to the above, Mrs Iborostated that mother tongue language is adopted by the children to learn in pre-primary level because of its benefits. She reported that the use of mother tongue language by the pre-primary school children enhance a smooth transition from home to school. Mrs Ibororo added:

*Most children feel frightened on their first day in the school. They feel strange and excluded when they are taught in their second language. This situation compels most of them to refuse to attend school in the first few days of resumption. But when the children are taught in their mother tongue, they become less-tense and stable for any serious academic exercise (interview, 2017).*

From the extracts, it is obvious that children's adoption of mother tongue language at the pre-primary school level significantly promoted from home to school transition. From

all indications, at the beginning of each school year, the children whose parents or wards registered them in the school for the first time, usually cries at getting to the school. This is because the school environment appears to be bigger than their houses and full of diverse people. Furthermore, the school environment becomes hustle to the children when second language is introduced as the language of communication and instruction in the school. It was established that the hustle environment the children were subjected may lead to their eventual dropping out of school. Similarly, it was also asserted that children who learn in their mother tongue do not find it difficult when a second or additional language is introduced as the primary language of instruction in the later stage of the primary education. Fluency and literacy in the mother tongue ultimately lay a cognitive and linguistic foundation for learning other additional languages. In other words, when a child receives formal instruction in his/her mother tongue at the primary school level, then gradually transition to academic learning in the English language, he/she would learn the second language as quickly as possible. Additionally, from the interpretive point of view, children who do not learn in their mother tongue lack self-confidence as learners, moreover, their interest in what they learn decline and this lead to poor academic performance which ultimately culminate in early drop out of school.

The finding of this study is in line with UNESCO (2008) position, who reported that to enhance quality in children's learning, the value of mother tongue instruction in early childhood and primary 1 to 3 classes of primary school should be encouraged. Furthermore, UNESCO (2008) encouraged the protection of children's home or indigenous languages and the preservation of the linguistic diversity asserting that it needs serious efforts to make sure that pre-primary children should be educated in their mother tongue. In addition, Ball (2010) who reported that the issues of language acquisition and the goal of Education for All (EFA) call for urgent attention to encourage the provision of quality education in their home language for learners. The findings have relevance to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural learning theory which emphasised the children's accomplishment of a task and the interaction between children and parents that scaffold and assist in the mother tongue acquisition process. In addition, to teach in the mother tongue enriches children's vocabularies. It also supports the development of children's critical thinking, thereby moving the children away from the parrot-like types of learning into concrete learning, whereby children may have personal appreciation of the language they acquire which consequently makes them to develop a self-motivated attitude towards learning (Turuk, 2008).

### **Adoption of English language**

When asked which of the languages the pre-primary school children adopted to teach, my participants answered by saying that the English language is most times used. Mrs Alice stated that the children who were born to parents from different ethnic groups with different language backgrounds are the ones who usually learn in English language. This is because their parents do not understand each other's indigenous language, therefore, they communicate with each other through English language. In light of the above, their children are compelled to learn in English language which is now the children's first language. In a similar circumstance, Mrs Bassey responded:

*Children who have dual citizenship are the people who exclusively learn in English language. These children learn in English language because they could not adopt the home language of either the mother or father hence resort to the adoption of the second language as their first language (interview, 2017).*

The above narratives indicated that the children learn in English language because of their inability to speak their mother or father's home language. It was understood that the children's parents who come from different ethnic nationalities and could not speak one's home language as a result of their backgrounds, their children are compelled to communicate and learn in English language as their first language due to lack of language uniformity at home. In a sharp contrast, Mrs Pricilla said that some parents made their children to be taught in English language because of social prestige attached to it. With the word 'social prestige,' I was forced to ask the correlation between the children learning in English language and the parents' social prestige. Mrs Pricilla explained:

*In this part of the world, most parents usually enroll and pay exorbitant tuition fees for their children in the pre-primary schools provided English language is used as official language of communication and instruction. This is because it is a thing of pride for parents if their children speak or learn in English language fluently (interview, 2017).*

From all indications, this extract indicated that the parents are of the view that when their children speak and learn in English language, the children's Intelligence Quotient (IQ) is high and that the ability to comprehend the content of the subject is equally high since the subject is written in English language. Based on this premise and despite financial challenges, parents endeavour to register their children in highly charged tuition fees pre-primary schools. Apart from the social prestige, Mrs Alice reported that most parents wanted their children to learn in English language since it is the official language used in the school in Nigeria. Mrs declared:

*I want to inform you that we want our children to learn in English language since the language is an official medium of instruction in the school. Therefore, speaking English with their children at home will assist them to master whatever subjects they are taught in the pre-primary school (interview, 2017).*

This narrative indicated that most parents began to teach and also force their children to learn in English language at the early age. They were of the opinion that making their children to speak and learn in English language at the early age helps them immensely in familiarising them with the medium which is going to be used in school. In other words, exposing children at the tender age to English language psychologically and emotionally preparing them for what is expected of them when they are in the secondary school level. Mrs Pricilla said that though the National Policy on Education (2004), section 2, subsection 3 clearly stipulates that "the medium of instruction will be principally the mother-tongue or the language of the community," English language is still openly adopted in most of the pre-primary schools in the semi urban and urban areas. I probed further why the schools in semi-urban and urban areas still allow children to be taught in English language against the official government policy. In response, Mrs Pricilla stated as follows:

*One important thing is that most of these pre-primary schools in Nigeria are owned by private individuals and organisations. Therefore, they only implement their own school's policy which is at variance with the official government policy (interview, August, 2017).*

This extract illustrated that most schools in Nigeria are owned by the private individuals and organisations, therefore, they do what they like regardless of what the official government policy stipulates. From my interpretive point of view, the reason why private individuals and organisations adopted English language as a medium of instruction in their schools is that, there is a popular belief in Nigeria that children who speak or learn in English language are regarded as highly intelligent individuals. Furthermore, it was revealed that the heads of primary schools in Nigeria prefer children who are able to speak and learn in English language for admission into their schools, because there is an assumption that these children will be able to cope with academic tasks which are taught in English language. This finding is at variance with position held by Skutnabb-Kangas and Dunbar (2010) who reported that learning in English language put the children under intellectual pressure because they have to learn new concepts in the second language. These scholars argued that this may create a difficult situation whereby the children have to cope with the problems that emerge from the second language used as a medium of instruction in schools. Earlier, Lightbown (2008) stated that becoming completely fluent in English language is not, as many have claimed, 'easy as pie,' rather, takes several years. Therefore, it is a mistake to assume that to allow day-care or preschool's children to learn in a second language is appropriate to prepare the children for academic success. Similarly, Mrs Gloria stated that aside from the parents' societal prestige and the assumption that the children who speak and learn in English language have a high degree of intelligence, the children who speak and learn in English language in the school is due to the environmental factor. Elaborating on the issue of environmental factor, Mrs. Gloria explained:

*By referring to environmental factor, it means that children speak and learn in English language because of the cosmopolitan nature of the area which they live and the location where their schools situates. In the cosmopolitan cities like Abuja, Lagos, Uyo and among others, it is easy for the children to speak and learn in English language because of the amalgam of diverse people from different tribes in Nigeria and other countries. The migration of different people to the cities made it impossible for the children in their mother tongue or language of immediate community (interview, 2017).*

This suggests that children who live in urban areas find it difficult to learn in mother tongue or language of immediate community as stipulated in the National policy on Education of 2004. The children's inability to learn in their mother tongue or language of immediate community was because of the coming together of people of different racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. Within a particular neighbourhood, a child may live with other neighbours who happens to come from other tribes and speak other languages from his/her own, therefore, the child's ability to acquire other languages becomes very difficult hence the use of English language as his/her first language to learn in the pre-primary school. According to Mothibeli (2005), children who have the privilege to receive their formal schooling in first language (English

language) for at least six years have higher levels of academic achievement than those who must transition too soon to education in a medium they lack the metacognitive skills to understand.

In furtherance to the above, MrsIboro said:

*Most parents have realised that with the increasing importance of English as a global language and a vehicle of prosperity in business, trade and commerce, therefore, they want their children to learn in English language from the early age (interview, 2017).*

Similarly, Mrs Louisa added:

*I want to state that if one visits any pre-primary school in Nigeria, pictures of animals and objects on the wall of the class are all written in English language. Children are made to identify these pictures by the teachers. Moreover, some food items which the children brought to the school such as biscuits, peanuts, sweet and ice cream the label are all written in English language, therefore, these children are unconsciously prevented from learning in native language (interview, 2017).*

From the extracts, it has been established that in the years past, languages such as Greek, Latin, Portuguese and Spaniard at one time or the other were used as an official language for global trade, industry and commerce. Children were made to learn in these languages so that when they grow old, they will be able to be engaged in this global trade, industry and commerce. In recent time, the attention has since been shifted to English language as a medium used for the transaction of business the world over. For instance, English language is used for business quotations, for writing of instruction on how to use any machines or equipment, financial transaction, research in business, sports, among others. Bearing this in mind, and the fact that the world has become a global village, most parents want their children to use English language at the early age in order to communicate with others globally in the area of commerce, trade, industry, sports, education, research, and music. In a similar vein, the finding indicated that English language is adopted in pre-primary school through the introduction of pictures of animals and objects in the class. Children are made to identify and pronounce the names of these animals and object which are written in English. It was established that since the classroom is decorated by pictures and objects with English inscription, children are compelled to learn in English language hence relegating their mother tongue to the background.

### **Ways in which language impact pre-primary school children's learning**

In this section, effort will be geared towards answering the second research question that bordered on ways in which language impact pre-primary school children's learning. Aside from the fact that language plays a crucial role in social interaction as propounded by Vygotsky (1978), it is also an important agent in the transmission of the cultural and social values. Furthermore, education is language-based, therefore, language is used at home and in school as a vehicle of thinking and communication that assists children to learn and understand the knowledge being imparted on them by the parents and teachers. In Nigeria, though the official government policy stipulates that the pre-primary school

children should be taught in their mother tongue or language of immediate community (NPE, 2004). However, the responses from my participants in the context of the first research question indicated that depending on where the children live, they adopted mother tongue, language of immediate community and English language to learn in school. With this in mind, this analysis revolved around these three languages that the children adopted as a medium of communication and instruction at home and school.

### **Identification, presentation and discussion of objects**

My participants explained that though language is the medium of communication and instruction at home and in school, it also significantly impart learning among the children in the area of identification, presentation and discussion of objects in the classroom. Specifically, Mrs Pricilla stated that at home her children especially when they were between the ages of one and three years old, language was used to identify, present and discuss freely with her children. Mrs Pricilla maintained that she used language to identify and present objects such as spoons, plates, beds, and toys among others to her children. She continued by saying that through language the functions of those objects were also explained to the children at home. In addition, MrsBasseyy avowed that without language children will be regarded as dummies or less human. This is because they would not be able to express their feelings, minds and thoughts to peers, other members of the family or community. I, therefore, probed further why children who could not speak language may be regarded as dummies or less human considering the fact the children with speech challenges can still use sign language. In response, MrsBasseyy declared:

*You see, in the rural communities like ours, children who cannot speak in any of the language are seen as dummies or less human. In fact, those children are usually kept away from other members of the community. The issue where these physical challenged children are exposed to sign language is very rare in this community (interview, 2017).*

From the narratives, it was asserted that language acquisition significantly impact ways in which children learn in the context of the identification, presentation and discussion of objects in pre-primary school and at home. From the perspective of traditional education, the parents use language to educate their young ones at home. They usually made their children imitate the family values. The acquisition of the language of a community allows the children to become a full member of that family or community. Additionally, it serves as an 'identity card' for the children because it signify where they originates. For instance, if a child speaks and discuss freely in Hausa language, he/she is assumed to come from Hausa land even though he/she is not from this ethnic group. In line with the above assertion, Tang (2002) argued that acquisition of language by the children allowed them to become more aware of the similarities and differences between cultures and linguistic structures. Similarly, findings also indicated that any child who is unable to speak any of the languages is tagged by the family members or members of the community as a dummy or less human, despite the fact that the child may be proficient in sign language. From all indications, the stigmatisation of children with language barrier negatively impacts their learning outcomes.

In another circumstance, MrsIboro narrated that language acquisition in the children immensely impart learning in the

area of knowing certain cooking utensils in Home Economics class. Since MrsIbobo statement was not clear, I requested her to explain what she meant by certain cooking utensils, MrsIbobo replied:

*Our girl children do not know the names of certain traditional cooking utensils during Home Economics class. Moreover, they do not also know the function of some of these utensils. Therefore, we use our local language to teach them the names and functions of some of the traditional cooking utensils. When this is done, the children will be able to learn, understand and appreciate our local cooking utensils” (interview, 2017).*

From the above quotation, it has been established that language plays an important role not only at Home Economics class but also in our kitchen. In recent time, due to civilisation and the production of modern cooking utensils, our local cooking utensils have been relegated to the background. Children do not know the names of some of the local cooking equipment. They are acquainted with those from the western world. Therefore, in order for the children to be conversant with the traditional cooking equipment, parents used mother tongue to show and highlight the importance of these equipment in the house. This finding is not consistent with the assertion by Hart and Risley (1995) who reported that parents who talk about objects and events in their immediate community, also engage in joint attention with their children as they label objects have children whose language acquisition is more advanced and they tend to comprehend things easily and effectively.

In addition, Mrs Pricilla said:

*Children use language in written tasks and in the construction of sentences to clarify and build meaning in the class. Furthermore, language allows children to repeatedly evaluate and clarify communication with regard to choice of subject contents (interview, 2017).*

Apparently, the quotations above indicated that language is used at pre-primary school level to construct sentences which draw meaning both to children and teachers. For instance, teachers mostly use the identification and demonstration teaching strategies in the classroom. These teaching strategies are effectively adopted in the class with the assistance of language. When a teacher talks to the children or tell them to observe what he/she is doing in the class, language in whatever form is used to pass this information to the children. In order for the children to comprehend what the teacher says, they should, first and foremost, have to listen attentively to words that come out from the teacher in form of language. According to Schleppegrell, Greer and Taylor (2008), academic language presents information and interpretation in new ways, using vocabulary, grammar, and text structures that children can learn to recognise when they read and to adopt when they write. In a similar circumstance, Mrs Gloria and Mrs Louisa reported that the language usage by children in the pre-primary school level assist them to improve their vocabulary which eventually leads to process of new ideas and higher levels of comprehension of the subject content. It was stated that children who talk more frequently in the class, aside from increasing their level of vocabulary and developing higher level of intelligence, it also helps them by improving their ego. From the narrative, it was established that language plays a significant role at the pre-primary school level. Teachers use language to communicate effectively with the children in the classroom. From all indications, teaching and learning can only take place when

there are actions and reactions between a teacher and the children. These actions and reactions occur within the classroom and it is made possible by language from both the teacher and children. From the interpretive point of view, an environment is regarded as a pre-primary school setting when a teacher using any form of language to identify, present and discuss on objects for the children to learn from. The assimilation of the subject content by the children is transmitted through language. The findings are in line with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural learning theory which advocated that the crucial feature of learning is to awaken a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the children are interacting through language with people in their environment and in cooperation with their peers. Additionally, once these processes are internalised, it become part of the independent academic achievement of the children. It was established that the language significantly impact learning among the children at the pre-primary school through the identification, presentation and discussion of the objects.

### Development of literacy skills

The issue of the development of literacy skills was unanimously mentioned as the impact in which language enhance at the pre-primary school children. Specifically, MrsBassey stated that when a child is given to birth, he/she will not be able to anything during early stage of his/her development. As the child grows, he/she through social interaction which is largely assisted by language is able to do what he/she could not do at birth.

Mrs Gloria added:

*I want to say that children between the ages of one and two years old, their vocabulary expand considerably during this period. This enable the children to use different grammatical forms and the understanding of language become clearer. Children within this age bracket, learn one to four words in a day (interview, 2017).*

In a similar circumstance, MrsIbobo informed me that children use language to express themselves to other members of the family. This is done through the mastery of words and concepts. Children's language becomes increasingly complex as they begin to combine morphemes. For instance, a word like 'play' is a single morpheme, and so is the suffixing, which is when, join together with a verb to name an action. The concept 'playing' comprises two morphemes. Therefore, MrsIbobo declared that children grow much older, the mean length of their ranting improves. At this point, children begin to adopt and make use of short, simple and clear sentences for other people in the family or community to understand. In addition to the above, Mrs Gloria observed that children naturally begin to make a complete sentence when they are about 15 months old. At the initial stage, a child may be thirsty, he/she will only be able to say 'water,' possibly pointing to where water is kept. However, as the child grows older, he/she is able to express emotion by saying 'I want to drink water.' Mrs Louisa and Mrs Pricilla mentioned three stages in which children acquire language. According to Mrs Pricilla, the stages are holophrases, telegraphic and overextension. Mrs Pricilla opined that during the holophrases children are unable to make a complete sentence. Rather, they make some disjointed utterances which are very difficult for both the teachers and other members of

the community to comprehend. At this point, the children are unable to express their emotion, rather, they resort to crying to attract attention. In the area of telegraphic speech, the group pointed that the children are able to improve, increase and expand their vocabulary. According to Mrs Pricilla, telegraphic speech naturally consists of syntax and semantic. At this stage, children are able to make simple correct sentences. For instance, a child would say that he/she is hungry for water, rather than he/she is thirsty for water. In the context of overextension stage, Mrs Louisa established that children at this stage move from telegraphic speech which border on the construction of simple sentences to little complex ones. Mrs Louisa reported that after telegraphic speech, there is no three-word stage. This is because at this stage, children begin to produce extended sentences just like their parents. Here, the children's vocabulary seemingly increases at astronomical rate. They started becoming skillful in the use of sentences.

Corroborating on the Mrs Louisa and Mrs Pricilla's position, Mrs Alice declared:

*In the overextension stage, children orations become pronounced and fluent for the teachers or any adult member of community to hear and understand. At this stage, the children spend most of their time talking either to the teachers or peers (interview, 2017).*

The above narratives clearly indicated that children at birth use undifferentiated crying to pass information or communicate with their parents. The crying could not be differentiated whether it is for the pain, hunger, discomfort and loneliness. With the passage of time, however, children begin to utter consonant-vowel together. For instance, at the age of eight months children are able to utter sound like 'papa or mama.' At the age of 15 months, the babbling sound from the children changes to more audible words. Children are able to use telegraphic speech that contains some words that convey meaning to the parents or teachers. At this stage, it was declared that children's vocabulary rapidly expand and increase to about 80 words per minutes. However, in spite of the fact children speak about 80 words per minutes, they are able to understand the concrete words only such as 'food', 'meat', 'sugar'. At this stage, the children are not able to logically construct any sentence that makes meaning. Parents or teachers are always left in their world of guessing of what the children says. From the age of two to four years, children's language become progressing. The same thing applies to their vocabulary and the length of sentence construction become increased hence children's ability to use all parts of speech. Children's understanding of concrete words suddenly moved to abstract meanings of such words. In support of this assertion, Mayekiso (2011) argued that at the age of five, children are capable of producing sentences that are efficient, complex and adult-like. The author revealed that the majority of the children at this age speak more and ask so many questions in a few minutes. Parents or teachers often feel bored when their children 'disturb' them with so many questions.

In furtherance to the above, it was said that between the ages of three and four years children begin to comprehend figurative expression such as 'the water is cold to take my bath'. By the age of five children has been able to understand imagery objects such as 'God lives in heaven'. From my position as a researcher, I would say that language development of the children in pre-primary education does not only involve an

increasing and expanding vocabulary or better sentence construction, rather, it also comprise of the increasing ability to adapt language to the context in which it is used. Similarly, the increase sophistication that children display in their language acquisition is partially attributable to their adoption of language rules, which they learn from listening to the speech of people from their immediate environment. From all indications, it is apparent that the higher-level aspects of oral language proficiency and efficiency among pre-primary school children significantly impact positively their reading skill ability. In furtherance to the above, the course of learning to read among children depends on the development of oral language skills, metalinguistic skills, alphabet familiarity, exposure to print and the understanding of print concepts. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural learning theory has relevance to the findings because it is believed that meaning is constructed through a combination of language. At home, child adopts language to express his/her feelings or emotion to the parents. While playing with his/her siblings, language is applied in order to make the play meaningful. Without the use of language, the play engaged by the children may be boring and meaningless. Language is used to identify the type of play children engage on.

From the school perspective, Vygotsky (1978) believed that human beings are very different from animals because they bring to the learning environment an evolutionary capacity to adapt and manipulate their environment. This is done through the use of language. Knowledge is generated in the classroom and transferred from learner to learner or from the teacher to learners through language. It is the language that opens the door to understanding subjects taught in the school. For Vygotsky (1978), language is the most important mediator. This is because it offers the children a powerful way to solve tasks given either at home or school. According to Gauthier and Genesee (2011), it is important for self-regulation and Jordan and Ashton (1996) argued that it facilitates inter-subjectivity.

## Conclusion

Recently, pre-primary education has expanded dramatically in Nigeria. However, there is no uniformity in the language used by the teachers in the teaching of the children at this level. The study concluded that the teachers and children at the pre-primary school adopted language of their immediate community, mother tongue and English language to teach and learn respectively. The adoption of these languages as a medium of instruction, no doubt causes confusion to children whose parents' language of immediate community or mother tongue is different from the one spoken by the host community. In another vein, the study revealed that the language acquisition by pre-primary learners was positively influences their identification, presentation and discussion of objects and the development of literacy skills. Furthermore, children's development as readers and writers happened as they engaged in a variety of literacy experiences and through interactions with literate persons (teachers) via language.

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