

Early Childhood English Language Acquisition of Hausa Children Living in Rural Communities of Kano State Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines the problem with early childhood English language acquisition of Hausa children living in rural communities in Kano State in that most of the children who grow up in rural communities do not know and cannot speak English language despite the fact that it's a medium of communication in their schools. Yet the English variant (pidgin) which they learn to speak in order to be able to communicate with their peers and other members of their society in their environment, cannot be said to ascribe solid competence and performance to them in the English language. The ultimate purpose of this paper therefore, is to look at the early childhood English language acquisition of Hausa children living in rural areas of Kano State and to offer suggestions that could lead to their solution. As a prelude to this, however an attempt is made to examine the theoretical framework of English language: Its meaning, how its generally acquired, its uses in early childhood education and its relationship with culture.

Keywords: Early childhood, English Language, Rural Communities, Children Acquisition, Education

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Introduction

Background of the Study

Language is perhaps the most distinctive behaviours that make human beings human. It is among the very form of behavior that one learns as children. Language is the primary vehicle through which human culture and unique experience is shared and transmitted from one generation to the next. Language is an indispensable means of interaction. As people interact with language, they construct meaning and social reality within the context of culture and unique experience within where they live. Language is important not only as a system or symbol of communication but also as a way of organizing a people's mode of thought. Language is an embodiment of ethnic identity, indeed each and every language represents a unique expression of the culture and identity of a people. (Otile & Ogonwo, 1994).

Language as it is known enables homo sapiens to communicate a variety of messages, meanings, intentions, thoughts, requests, commands and items of information. Language is crucial to human existence and it stands at the centre of human affairs. According to Urdanga (1998), language is a body of words and systems common to people of the same community, nation of the same geographical area or the same cultural tradition. It is also the communication by voice, using arbitrary, auditory symbols in conventional ways with conventional meanings. It is any set or system of such symbols as used in a more or less uniform fashion by a number of people, who are thus enabled to communicate intelligibly with one another.

There is no doubt that English is a global language. As such, it is spoken by millions of people as first, second or foreign language. The colonial masters introduced the English language to Nigerians as they did not value the native languages. The English language was considered as the only means of instruction in training people to serve in the government and the only official means of communication. The Quality, efficiency and effectiveness of Nigeria's education and educational curriculum relied on the English language as the lingua franca cum official language. English became a second language in Nigeria due to the multi – lingua nature of the nation and it helped in the unification of the country. Nigeria was divided into two protectorates, the Northern protectorate and Southern protectorates. The country was amalgamated in 1914, and presently it has been divided into thirty six states. In the Southern Nigeria homes, children were taught and encouraged from the cradle to speak English as a language of communication. People speaking any of the Nigerian languages in environments where the English language would have been spoken are derogatorily considered as not to have arrived. In Northern Nigerian homes, Hausa language (mother tongue) appeared to have found approval and favour above English language. This derogation and relation have found approval mostly among the Hausa children living in rural communities of Kano State.

The average Hausa children in rural areas still find it overwhelmingly difficult in learning the skill of written and spoken English. This problem is unequivocally placed at the door steps of teachers of English, parents and government.

Ashby notes that;

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classroom is such that all pupils are at a
serious disadvantage. It cannot be

doubted that thousands of the most gifted are unable to further their education because they were not taught well the language in which they were examined.

Early childhood English language acquisition can easily equip the children in rural communities to confidently meet other people from other English – speaking nations of the world for all transactions. Above all children in the rural communities need to acquire a competence in the English language in order to be fluent in it.

Early childhood learning/acquisition varies in scope and seems to be closely linked to geographical location. While the main thrust of some definitions is based on age brackets, some consider the environment within which the education is delivered, others combined both. Early childhood education has been considered to be a pre-school, semi-formal education outside the home. It includes the crèche, the nursery and kindergarten. This programme was introduced for children between the age of 0 – 5 years.

All children are born ready to learn language to communicate with the significant people in their lives. Within the first few years of life, virtually all developing children master the basics of one language. Although this is a complex task that requires much effort, it is expected and considered normal. Increasingly, in Kano State, young children are in learning environments where more than one language is used. There is a growing and convincing body of research that high quality early childhood acquisition of English language can improve the educational achievement of children from diverse linguistic and rural backgrounds and help to reduce this achievement gap before kindergarten. Therefore, it is important for the early childhood profession to have a clear understanding of how children acquire a second language in order to design high quality learning environments for children who are in the process of acquiring English as their second language.

It is commonly assumed that pre-school-aged children in rural areas can just ‘pick up’ a second language without much effort or systematic teaching. However, becoming proficient in a language is a complex and demanding process. As with any type of learning, children will vary enormously in the rate at which they learn a first or second language. The speed of English language acquisition is due to factors both with the child and in the child’s learning environment. The child’s personality, aptitude for English languages, interest and motivation interact with quantity and quality of language inputs and opportunities for use to influence the rate and eventual fluency levels.

That language acquisition and development are dependent upon some factors such as the milieu or the type of contacts that a child has during his linguistic puberty and that is why this study investigates early childhood English language acquisition among Hausa children living in rural communities of Kano State with a view to determining the influence environment, parents and religion has on a child’s English language acquisition and the effect of this acquisition on indigenous language.

The linguistic setting of rural communities where this study is based already favours not the use of English language to bridge the communication gap created by multilingualism. Emphasis is placed much on Hausa and Arabic languages. Unfortunately many parents in rural communities of Kano State do not see the need of children acquiring English language. Therefore, Hausa

language serves as a lingua franca and its technically imposed on one with the saying ‘Ba Turanchi’. Only the literate and semi literate families favour and tend towards acquiring English at the child is early stage. A trend which became noticeable in the 1990s among the elite, upper and middle class parents who deliberately encourage their children to acquire English, only or simultaneously with indigenous (Hausa) language. This is attributable to the prestige attached to a good command of the language. There are also academic and economic advantages associated with English.

Consequently, parents in urban areas see early acquisition of good English as a strategy to avoid failure. In actual fact, some parents prefer to send their children to very expensive schools where it is believed that the standards are high enough to ensure adequate mastery of English. This is not the situation in the many rural communities where this research is carried out.

Statement of Problem

Kano State has a population estimated to be above 5 million people. English is the official language, the principal lingua franca, the language of wider communication, politics, mass media, and international commerce, as well as the medium of instruction at all levels of education. Proficiency or a certificate in English, is required of anyone who aspires to elective or public office, and anyone who wants to function outside his immediate linguistic environment.

Parents, teachers and government has not promoted early child acquisition of English language in rural areas of the state. This has serious negative implications on the rural children development. Above all, when these children growing up in rural areas are taken to the urban areas they function less and they are regarded as ignorant and uncivilized, a most unhealthy growth and development situation for the children of a society.

The problem which necessitated this study stems from the above observation and if this trend is not checked, it will in the next few years, start manifesting negatively in that the child will not be able to function properly outside his linguistic environment.

Purpose of the Study

The major purpose of this study was to investigate early childhood English language acquisition of Hausa children living in rural communities of Kano State.

Specifically, the study sets out to –

1. Ascertain the types of language(s) spoken in the child’s home.
2. Find out the language of instruction in the school the child attends.
3. Find out why the parents of Hausa children living in rural communities are not interested in English language.
4. Reveal the effects of a child’s acquisition of English as a second language.

Significance of the Study

Early childhood English language acquisition of Hausa children living in rural communities of Kano State failure is attributed to the environment and early acquisition of English language will improve the educational achievement of the rural children who will be able to compete favourably with their counterparts in urban areas. As the child is growing, there are also socio-economic advantages associated with English. A credit pass in English is required by most employers and for admission to institutions of higher learning and the attitude of parents who do not encourage their children to acquire and speak English language.

In short, failure in English places one at a disadvantage in terms of employment, further studies and other areas of national life.

Teachers, policy maker and students would find the result of this study useful in that it will contribute significantly to the knowledge and understanding of early childhood education and for further and future research. From this study, parents would be made to know that they have a role to play in encouraging their children to speak English language more often than mother tongue (Hausa language).

Research Questions

The following questions were raised in line with the purpose of study to guide the research work.

1. What languages are spoken in the child's home?
2. What is the language of instruction in the school the child attends?
3. Are the parents interested in encouraging the child to acquire English as second language?
4. What are the effects of a child's inacquisition of English as a second language?

Research Methodology

Research Design

A survey research design will be used to elicit information from the respondents Olaitan and Nwoke (1999) defined a survey research design as a descriptive study in which the entire population or representative sample is studied by collecting and analyzing data from the group through the use of questionnaire. The survey design is therefore considered suitable, since the study will seek information from a sample that will be drawn from a population, using questionnaire.

Area of the Study

This study was carried out in seven rural communities of Kano State namely: Tsanyawa, Badume, Kwa, Bichi, Shanono, Gwarzo and Dambatta.

Research Population

This study concentrated on children within the age range of 2 – 5 who already speak a first language. A total of 82 respondents form the population of the study. This number comprises parents of children under study and selected teachers in the schools that these children attend.

Sample Size/Sampling Technique

The sampling technique adopted for this study is the purposive sampling technique. This sampling technique was adopted because the researcher had to look for certain characteristics that must be represented. Using this technique, a sample size of 61 was drawn from the population.

Research Instrument

To obtain basic information, parents and teachers were interviewed. The researcher also visited homes of the children, and observed them as they interacted with their parents and at play with their peer group. However, the primary research instrument used was questionnaire which was administered to teachers in the 14 selected schools. Also, the head teachers of some visited schools granted the researcher audience as they were interviewed.

Data Collection Procedure

The instruments for data collection used were two sets of questionnaire and interview schedule. Six structured/close ended questions and five structured or open – ended questions were posed to elicit detailed information. This type of instrument is preferred in order to bring the researcher face – to – face with the interviewees or respondents. Teachers in the 14 visited schools were personally handed the questionnaires, which were collected immediately upon their filling the required details. It must be reported that some of the children’s parents met were illiterate and did not personally fill the questionnaires. Instead, they were interviewed and one used their responses to fill the questionnaires on their behalf.

This method of data collection constituted the primary data. For the secondary data, relevant textbooks, unpublished project works and journals were used to enrich the quality of the work.

Data Presentation and Analysis

A total of (61) sixty one questionnaires were administered in the fourteen (14) schools. The collected data are presented on tables and analyzed using simple percentages. Two sets of questionnaire were distributed to different respondents. One set was designed specifically for teachers, while the other set was prepared for parents of the children under investigation. A total of 61 copies were given out to respondents for the purpose of collecting data. Thirty one copies were given out to teachers, while thirty copies were distributed to parents who served as respondents. Out of a total of sixty one (61) copies of the questionnaire distributed 58 were returned, but only 54 were properly filled. Hence, this analysis was based on the 54 copies that were properly filled and retrieved.

Research Question 1

What language(s) is/are spoken in the child's home?

Data relevant to this research question were collected using two questions from the questionnaire. The summary of data is presented in table 1 below.

Table 1: The languages spoken in the child's home.

S/No.	Question Item	No. of Respondents	Response Language	No.	Frequency of Response
1	What is your mother tongue or first language?	54	Hausa	48	89%
			Yoruba	2	4%
			Igbo	4	7%
			English	0	0%
2	What is the language of communication at home?	54	Hausa	52	96%
			Yoruba	1	2%
			Igbo	1	2%
			English	0	0%

From the data collected, 48 respondents representing 89% of the children's parents have Hausa as their mother tongue or first language. 2 respondents representing 4% speak Yoruba as their first language, 4 respondents representing 7% speak Igbo as their first language while none speak English.

For the second question, 52 (or 96%) of the respondents speak Hausa to the children at home, 1 respondent (or 2%) speak Yoruba, 1 respondent representing 2% also speak Igbo to their children at home, while none speak English to their children at home.

From the analysis above, it shows that most parents speak their mother tongues to their children from birth.

Research Question 2

What is the language of instruction in the school the child attends?

Data relevant to this research question were collected using question 3, 4 and 5 of the questionnaire. The summary of data is presented in table 2 below.

Table 2: The language of instruction in the school the child attends.

S/No.	Question Item	No. of Respondents	Response Language	No.	Frequency of Response
3	Which language does the child speak in the class?	54	Hausa English Others	54 0 0	100% 0% 0%
4	Which language does the child speak with his/her mates?	54	Hausa English Others	54 0 0	100% 0% 0%
5	In which language is the child taught in school?	54	Hausa English Others	36 18 0	67% 33% 0%

Analyzing the first question on the table 2 which is the third question of the questionnaire, 54 respondents representing 100% were of the view that the child expresses him/herself in Hausa language in the class while no child expresses him/herself in English language as a medium of communication in the class. The second question on the table which is question 4 on the questionnaire sought to find out which language the child speaks with his/her mates. 54 respondents representing 100% agreed that the child speaks Hausa to his/her mates while at play and none speaks English language with his or her mate during play time. The third question on the table sought to find out which language the child is taught in the school. 36 respondents representing 67% agreed that they use Hausa in teaching the children, 18 or (33%) agreed that it is English language.

It is depicted from the analysis that majority of the children express themselves in Hausa language both in the class and at play time and that Hausa language is the major language of teaching the children in school.

Research Question 3

Are the parents interested in encouraging the children to acquire English as second language?

Data relevant to this research question were collected using question 6 and 7 of the questionnaire as presented in table 3 below.

Table 3: The parents' influence on a child's acquisition of English language.

S/No.	Question Item	No. of Respondents	Response Language	No.	Frequency of Response
6	What language do you think the child acquired due to the influence of parents?	54	Hausa English Others	54 0 0	100% 0% 0%
7	What language do you think the child acquired due to the influence of environment?	54	Hausa English Others	52 2 0	96% 4% 0%

Table 3 has questions meant to give answer to research question 3. 54 respondents representing 100% agreed that the child acquired Hausa language due to the influence and encouragement of the parents while 52 respondents were of the opinion that the child acquired Hausa language due to environmental factors.

From the analysis above, it is evident that parents and environmental factors did not encourage children to acquire English language at their early stage of language formation.

Research Question 4

What are the effects of a child's inacquisition of English as a second language in rural communities of Kano State?

To answer this research question, a number of opinions meant to answer the questions were presented. The analysis of the responses is displayed on the table below.

Table 4: Effects of inacquisition of English as a second language.

S/No.	Options	Frequency	Percentage
8	Negative attitude toward English language.	18	33%
9	Inability to speak or express oneself in English language.	14	26%
10	Feeling inferior outside one linguistic environment.	10	19%
11	Inadequate use of English language in school especially at play	12	2%

From the above table 4, the majority of the respondents which is 18 representing 33% were of the view that a child's will form negative attitude and loose interest in learning and speaking English language. 14 respondents representing 26% were of the opinion that none early acquisition of English language by the children will not make them speak or express themselves better in English. 10 respondents representing 19% were of the view that the child that could not speak, communicate freely in English language feel inferior outside his linguistic environment. 12 respondents representing 22% agreed that children could not effectively use English language in school while at play.

Discussion of Findings

This study was targeted at parents and teachers of Hausa children living in rural communities of Kano State. The researcher chose these groups of people because they are the closest to the child in the home and at school. As they respond to the immediate need of the child in that they have special roles to play in the child's early language acquisition.

This study employed the use of questionnaire which contains 11 questions to elicit information from the respondents. The areas of the study are homogeneous speech communities where Hausa language is the prevailing mother tongue or first language. It is for this reason that Hausa language is majorly directed to the child as a first language due to the fact that most of their parents are illiterates who did not start as early as possible to introduce the English language but only using the mother's tongue.

It was also gathered that the parents of these children speak their various mother tongue at home and fail to speak English language to the children.

On the question of which languages a child expresses his/herself, some of the respondents answered that some of the children use Hausa at home, outside the home and in the school. He or she responds to the language directed him which in most cases is the mother's tongue.

From the teacher's angle, it was gathered that the medium of instruction in the school is English language since English is the language of instruction in Nigeria, but the fact that the communities investigated are homogenous speech communities the teachers tend towards using mother tongue as a medium of instruction for a better understanding. Teachers pointed out that it is only in a few cases that the child is taught in English language in class or at play.

The respondents also agreed that it is the home and environment which the child finds him/herself that influence his early acquisition of English as a second language.

However, learning English in Nigeria is imperative as it is a global language which communication with outside world will be difficult. Children must be assisted, encouraged and aided for their ultimate success in academics, economics, politics and social activities in Nigeria and outside. From this analysis, it is evident that English language is not effectively used in the study areas and children are not encouraged by their parents and teachers to speak English as their first language. This finding agrees with Surakat (2009) and Osho, Aliyu, Okolie & Onifade (2014) statement that Nigerian children are no longer competent in their use of English language, thus, leading to low performance in their academics.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions were drawn.

The average Hausa children still find it overwhelmingly difficult in learning the skill of written and spoken English. This problem is unequivocally placed at the door step of parents and teachers of English.

The quality of English used in the classroom and environment is such that all pupils are at a serious disadvantage. It cannot be doubted that thousands of the most gifted are unable to further their education because they were not taught well in the English language in which they were examined.

Recommendations

Based on the findings made and conclusions drawn from the study, the following recommendations were made:-

Parents should strive to encourage their wards to learn and speak English language for better academic performance.

Teacher should encourage and motivate the children to learn and speak English language therefore, it is important for the early childhood teacher to have a clear understanding of how children acquire a second language in order to design high quality learning environments for children who are in the process of acquiring English as their second language.

Parents and members of the language communities should also change their wrong attitude of seeing their indigenous language as superior. Thus, there is need for a general re-orientation on the psyche of parents and the society at large towards English language.

Since government appreciates the importance of English language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion; and preserving culture. Government should introduce high quality early childhood acquisition of English language which can improve the educational achievements of children.

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