

# Folk Literature: An Indispensable Tool in Child Language Acquisition and Development

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## Abstract

Researches carried out by various language development experts indicate that babies babble a lot at 3 to 6 months due to biological readiness, and not due to reinforcement. At about 10 to 13 months, they are able to utter their first words. These are followed by two word utterances at 18 to 24 months and by this time, they are aware of the importance of expressing certain concepts and the role of language in communicating with others. These developments can be achieved because these children have been immersed in a network of social interactions among members of the society. This supports the fact that society is an indispensable element in child language development. But language is not learned in a social vacuum. As verbal language is the most pronounced aspect of representation language, children acquire it through modeling and imitation of adult who expand and recast children utterances to improve their linguistic ability. It is on this premise that this paper sees folk literature as an indispensable tool in the language acquisition skill of the children in the pre-primary and primary education sector. This paper adopts the interactionist theory of language acquisition which posits that language learning results from the interaction of the learners innate ability and their language environment, especially the feedback they receive from adult fluent speakers to monitor and improve their output. The result of the findings show that through the use of some instructional devices such as songs, riddles, anecdotes and the like, especially in the mother tongue of the child at the early stage, children's phonological, syntactical and semantic outputs are greatly improved. The study, therefore, recommends among other things that the use of folk literature as an institutional device taught in the mother tongue of the learner, should be include in the educational curriculum at the early stages of child language acquisition to enable the child acquire the full potentials of language acquisition.

## 1. Introduction

At birth infants are thought to have little knowledge of the world in which they find themselves. However immediately a child is born, the child begins to learn not only to adapt to the external environment but to learn the ways of life of his people. Hence the early years of a child is filled with the acquisition of linguistic and other cultural practices of his people. In this respect, Eyabulewa (2013:234), avers that the time from birth to eight years is a critical period in the development of many fundamental skills in all areas of child development. This, it is believed, may have been the reason why there has been an increased emphasis on the early childhood education.

Explaining the rationale for early education of the child, Abonyi (2014), while highlighting the policy statements therein in NERDC (2004), states that; Nigeria's intervention in the children's early years of language learning and development is rooted in the *National Policy on Education* which is premised on the effective development of the child into a sound and effective citizen and the need for equality of educational opportunities to all children. This prompted the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004) to include pre-primary education and the guideline for its operation in the National Policy on Education. It therefore led to the enrolment of the young ones who may not have acquired the first word into the formal education system.

On the other hand, child rearing in the traditional society where children are taught the virtues of truth, humility, love and their like through folklore has given way to the recitation of ABC and 123. This, therefore agrees with postulates that literacy of nursery or even sometimes at the early primary level is mostly a linguistic process as most of what is done in the school depends on the child's knowledge of his language. However, since the language ability does not surface before the child reaches two to four years, submits Randford (1990), the implication of this says Iroegbu et al (2003) is that children at this age should be taught with very simple words. At this juncture, it becomes very necessary that a kind of play-way method which involves the use of songs, riddles, tongue, twisters, folktales and other oral narrative games are employed to enable them grasp the content of the subject matter. In line with the above, Rice (1989) offers that the teach ability of the children upon a synergistic balance of interacting skills and knowledge bases.

Further, it is necessary to emphasize that the manner in which the child must be taught is very crucial. This is because as the education of the child starts from the home, children bring a wide variety of intellectual, perceptual, social and motor competencies to language learning (Rice, 1989). In agreement with the above assertion, Johnson (2006) submits that children equally come into the task of language learning with perceptual mechanisms that function in a certain way. This is because language learning and cognitive development is a unitary process (Kean and Personke, 1976). As such, since the child is still acquiring and learning his language,

the need to focus on language development becomes prominent in the school and at home. The question now is what are the skills that can be adopted by the language instructors at this level to enable the child acquire the language with ease? What language of instruction is employed in both private and public pre-primary/primary schools at this level? What are the parents' perception and preference, relating to whether they would prefer their children/wards to be instructed in the mother-tongue/language of the immediate environment or not?

An earlier version of the *National Policy on Education (NPE)* of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, revised in 1981, has the following on the importance of language and the language of instruction at the preprimary and the primary levels of education. In addition to appreciating the importance of language in the educational process, as a means of presenting the people's culture, the Government considers it to be in the interest of the national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother tongue. In this connection, the government considers the three major languages to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (p.8)

To achieve the ... objectives (of preprimary education), Government will ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community...(p10)... Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary schools is initially the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community and at later stage English (p.13) .

The above statement by the Government was not fabricated overnight but came up as a result of the series of conscientious researches conducted by the language acquisition experts. This is as a result of the importance attached to the mother-tongue language. Thus, Okediadi (2010) refers to it as the first language an individual acquires, which has greater prominence in the life of every individual. Afolayan (1988) also defines it as "the only language of a monolingual person, which meets all his linguistic needs". It is usually the sequentially first language of a bilingual or multilingual person... the language that fully identifies with the personal or native culture of a bilingual or multi-lingual person. From the foregoing, it could be deduced that the great importance attached to the use of mother tongue is because it is the language in which a person conducts his everyday activities and has the greatest linguistic activity or intuitive knowledge. It is the language that has sociocultural functions of serving as the instrument of Nationalism in a speech community or nation. It is an internalized habit which emphasizes proficiency and knowledge of the basic skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing. It becomes a distinctive characteristic feature of man which has the major function of communication. The child acquires knowledge of this language from his immediate family; parents, siblings, uncles and aunts at home before he is exposed to formal institution and education. He internalizes this initial education and uses it in his day to day activities. Hence, the pride of place given to it in primary and lower primary level of education and so, the need for the use of folk literature taught in the medium of the mother tongue/languages of the immediate environment as an indispensable tool in child language acquisition/learning. The implication is that to achieve this, there should be parental involvement at home.

## 2. Framework

Language acquisition and development has been the subject of concern to language experts. Chomsky (1959) posits that humans are born with the ability to acquire language (Morrison, 2001). On the other hand, Santrock (2007) and Agbedo (2009) are of the opinion that language acquired in the content of the society. It is on this basis that the interactionist theory of language acquisition which is a mediationist theory hinges on the interactionist theory was profounded. This paper therefore hinges on the interactionist theory. Interactionist theory is a mediationist approach in relation to language acquisition. Explaining the history of interactionist theory, Agbedo (2003) observes that decades before the idea was made popular, linguists like Chomsky (1957) argue that humans are biologically pre-wired to acquire language at a certain time and in certain way. Chomsky went further to state that children are born into the world with a language acquisition device (LAD), a biological (innate) endowment that enables the child to detect the features and rules of language. On the other hand, Bruner (1996) emphasizes that socio-cultural contexts are vital in child language acquisition/development. Interactionist approach is an approach that timely blends these through opposing schools of thought.

According to Nwachukwu (1995), interactionist approach "emphasis that higher levels of development (in language acquisition) emerges out of constructive interactions between innate and environmental factors". In line with this view, Tomasello and Slobin (2004) affirm that an interactionist approach emphasizes that both biology (innate abilities) and experience (socio-cultural content) contribute to language acquisition. In support of this stand, Agbedo (2009:76) points out that the interactionist view point is that all humans can acquire language, provided there is no family history of deviant genetic inheritance, no signs of serious organic defects and there is rich experience of language communication between the child and others, that is, a home background, which indicates that the child has not been deprived emotionally, intellectually or economically.

He went further to affirm that every human being can develop language given the conditions of normality and minimal exposure to language. Interactionist theory posits that language learning results from the

interaction of the learners' innate ability and their language environment, especially the feedback they receive from fluent speakers to monitor and improve their output. This theory emphasizes the importance of the learners' language environment and their opportunity to produce language and receive feedback. Without the stimulation of that specific language in that specific language – using community according to (Agbedo, 2009), it would appear that the child will not acquire language.

Furthermore, while supporting the view of Lightbrown & Spada (1999) on interactionist theory which states that language acquisition is a product of complex interaction of the child's linguistic environment and the child's internal mechanism, Owen Tong, Jin & Tarmini (2011:2) observe that modified verbal language, also called "motherese" is deemed to be crucial in language acquisition. This theory is, therefore essential in explaining how children acquire language since it sees language acquisition as emanating from both the child's innate potential and the environment.

### **3. The meaning of folk literature**

In the literate world we find ourselves, often there is the confusion between the written text and literature per se. What is not written is erroneously often deemed not to exist and writing is falsely equated with civilization. This shouldn't be indeed, literature strictly speaking should not concern itself with the "written" word but with the word per se, whether written or unwritten. The important thing is that the text of such a construct should be fixed either in a written form or in the consciousness of the speech community.

Literature according to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of current English is a piece of writing that is valued as works of art, especially novels, plays and poem. Folk literature is, therefore, that piece of writing that's traditional and typical of the ordinary people of a country or community. It is the type of literature owned or possessed by a particular set of people from a particular set of people from a particular set of people from a particular place and was originally passed on to the people in a spoken form.

Possession of literature, written or oral, modern or traditional, says Obiechina (1978) is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the homo sapiens. There are no people anywhere in the world who in the course of their evolving an integral social life in their encounter with their environment, have failed to develop structurally organized rhetorical modes for giving expression to their emotional impulses and verbalizing, in rhythm sequences, their deepest human aspirations. There are no people who have not been able to dramatize, in symbolic and aesthetic terms, the major ritual, religious and secular events of their collectively shared experiences. Possession of literature strongly underlines the sense of individual identity as well as reinforcing the attachment of individuals to the community. It ensures the emotions matrix that cements the reciprocal interaction of the individual with community and community with the individual. Literature in its widest functional context, guarantees for a community a certain stabilization of its structures of action. It helps the community to clarify its basic ideas of morality, its sense of what constitutes the beautiful, the sublime and the comical in human affairs. It offers the individuals in society their best scope for expressing their feelings of joy and sorrow, their triumphs and defeats, their heightened appreciation of their vital forces no less than the depths of tragic pathos into which they occasionally fall, in their full realization of their vulnerability as human beings.

Folk literature, otherwise known as traditional literature has both spoken and written modes. This literature is characterized by oracy and as such referred to as oral literature. It is further divided into folk narratives, poetic verses and traditional drama. Indeed, traditional literature differs from modern literature simply because it is written down. It draws from the same pool as traditional literature is of great antiquity, modern literature came into being with the introduction of Western education.

### **4. Scope and Delimitations of the Study**

Folk literature comprises of three genes namely poetry, prose and drama. Of these three genes, poetry is preferred. The preference is due mainly to the fact that it is invariably defined in terms of its artistic composition, imaginative language, patterned arrangement and depth of thought or feeling. Thus its definition by Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English as a piece of writing arranged in patterns of lines and sounds, expressing in imaginative language some deep thought, feeling or human experience.

### **5. The Impact of Folk Literature on Child Language Acquisition and Development**

Every normal child is capable of appreciation literature by responding to the sounds and meanings of words as well as gestures, facial expressions, environmental factors, postures and bearing voice and space. This level of literacy appreciation can be achieved only with the help of the creative teacher. The teacher has ample opportunity to read to the child in the class. For the child, it is not sufficient merely to read every word clearly, pronounce it correctly and observe punctuation marks. To keep the child's attention and interest, the teacher needs to make his reading lively and dramatic rather than mechanical and lifeless. A teacher who makes the additional effort to develop and practice oral communication skills in presentation of literature will be guiding the pupils towards a keen participatory and enduring involvement not only in reading, but also in writing.

In this section, a careful look at the various ways the child's language acquisition process can be phonologically, syntactically and semantically developed will be the focus. This can be achieved through the use of rhythm, rhyme, choral speaking and refrain. Our analysis will be based on a poem taken from *Abu na Egwuregwu Igbo* Ugomma (1980) thus:

1. G[n] mere mmadx?
2. Qnwx gburu mmadx
3. G[n] mere mmadx?
4. Mmadx nuru mmiri
5. G[n] mere mmadx?
6. Mmiri menyuru oku
7. Oku mere gini?
8. Oku rejiri uta
9. Xta mere g[n]?
10. Xta gbagburu egbe
11. Egbe mere g[n]?
12. Egbe buru okuko
13. Qkxkq mere g[n]?
14. Qkxkq riri akika
15. Ak[ka mere g[n]?
16. Ak[ka tara mkporo
17. Mkporo mere g[n]?
18. Mkporo mawara xkwa
19. Xkwa mere g[n]?
20. Xkwa dagburu Nwaakadimkporo
21. Ee Nwaakadimkporo

### 5.1 Rhythm

In general, Igbo poetry is metrical, which means that it conforms to definite laws of prosody or the regular flow of language measured in rhythmic units Ugonna (1976). In oral poetry, the rhythmic unit is the breath length (ahiri ekumume) which is the unit of utterances between one breath pause (nchere ekumume) and another. This breath-length in oral poetry or verse in written poetry. The breath-length or line constitutes the rhythm unit in Igbo poetry which is measured in dance step which may conveniently express the idea of "foot" as used in English prosodic analysis. A rhythmic segment is made up of a number of high toned and low-toned syllables which are subtly patterned to produce same form of rhythm.

Rhythm in this poem is achieved through a constant repetition of some phonemes occurring in some lexical items in successive lines of utterances. In the first six lines of the above poem, there is the reoccurrence of the bilabial nasal stop /m/ which runs through the entire lines in a successive utterance. This is realized through a constant repetition of such lexical items as mmadx, mmiri, mere, menyuru, mawara and mkporo. This recurrence of the bilabial nasal stop /m/ runs alternately through almost all the lines of the poem in the word "mere". Also recurrent in the poem is the alveolar plosive sounds /t/, /d/, and /n/, in the lexical items "ut a" (LL 9 and 10), "tara" (LL 16), "dagburu" (LL 20), "...dimkporo" (LL 20-21) and "...ni" in the lexical item "gini" which runs through all the alternate lines.

Prominent in the lines of the poem also are the velar plosives /k/, /g/ and /ŋ/. The voiceless velar plosive is realized in the lexical items "Oku", "Okuko" and "akika" (LL 7, 8, 13 & 14). The voiced velar plosive /g/ is realized in the constant repetition of the word "gini" a question which runs through the alternate lines and the velar nasal /ŋ/ as realized in the word "nuru" (L. 4). There is also the reoccurrence of the voiceless labial velar /kw/, /kp/ and /ŋw/ being realized in the lexical items "ukwa" (L 19) , "mkporo" (LL 17&18), and "nwa" (LL 20&21). Also preponderant is the realization of the voiced Labial velar /gb/ and /gw/ as in "gbagburu" (L. 10), egbe (L. 11&12).

The presence of the palatal sound /ɲ/ as realized in the word "menyuru" (L. 6) cannot be overlooked as it also contributes to the overall development of the acquisition of the plosive sounds.

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Composers of music and writers of poetry use these alliterative qualities of language to imitate different moods, emotions, actions and movement. This is what makes poetry so pleasurable when it is read aloud as it is meant to be. Children respond naturally to rhythm if they can be made to drum gently on their desk to the beat they perceive in the teacher's reaching, they might gain a fuller appreciation of the poem. The teacher on his own

part stresses on these prominent recurrent plosive sounds. The teacher indicates in the text the syllables bearing these plosive sounds and writes them out with a superscript.

In what follows, the teacher writes out these phonemes so as to use them in teaching the children one of the three ways whereby the manner of articulation could be classified.

These ways include

- Complete closure
- Potential closure
- Open closure/approximation

Having identified some of the phonemes in the lexical items as contained in the lines of the poem, the teacher classifies their manner of articulation as complete closure otherwise known as stops. Stops in Igbo include:

Bilabial      p b m  
Alveolar     t d n  
Palatal       ɲ  
Velar         k g ŋ  
Labial vela kw gw kp gb nw

The teacher will tell the pupils that each stop is produced with an initial articulation, followed by a radical hold stage. The hold stage is followed by a radical release or plosive Mba and Mba (2010:53).

Consequently, these identified stops will be used to develop lexical items in the language of the study thus:

/p/ as in pxq, papa, pqpq  
/b/ as in b[a, buru, bata  
/m/ as in mama, mmiri, mmemme  
/t/ as in taa, tie, txq  
/d/ as in dada, danye, dapx  
/n/ as in nxrx, nara, napxta  
/ɲ/ as in nyxq, nyee  
/k/ as in kxq, kunye, kupu  
/g/ as in gaa, gara, gunye  
/ŋ/ as in juo  
/kw/ as in kwee, kwxq  
/gw/ as in gwaa

The teacher pronounces these phonemes and while the pupils repeat after him. This way, they master both the sounds, words and the lexical items through which the combination of the sounds were made possible.

## 5.2 Syntactic development

Children's acquisition and development of simple sentence structures can be made possible through choral speaking. Choral speaking means speaking together, or combining a number of voices in simultaneous utterances. Choral speaking is naturally appealing to children who enjoy group activities because it is not as threatening as carrying out an activity alone. It encourages shy children who would otherwise not have participation to loosen up. Choral speaking can be used in a variety of ways to promote literacy appreciation and it is the most suitable for poetry reading, recitation or conversation in children.

The class may be divided into two groups by gender or row by row or along any other suitable lines. The group alternates in the reading of the poem stanza by stanza or line by line depending on the structure of the poem. Using the poem under analysis, the choral reaching may done line by line because the poem is the free versed type and so have what one would call staccato rhythm.

The class will be divided into two rows, the first row comprising all the females in the class while the second row comprises all the males. The arrangement of the reading goes thus:

### Females

Gini mere mmadu  
Mmadu mere gini  
Mmiri mere gini  
Oku mere gini  
Uta mere gini  
Egbe mere gini  
Okuko mere gini  
Akika mere gini  
Mkporo mere gini

### Males

Onwugburu mmadu  
Mmadu nuru mnini  
Mmiri menyuru oku  
Oku rejini uta  
Uta gbagburu egbe  
Egbe buru okuko  
Okuko riri akika  
Akita tara mkporo  
Mkporo mawara ukwa



Ukwa mere gini

Ukwa dagburu Nwaakadimkporo

At the end of the entire lines, both group will together chorus be Nwaakadimkporo.

This arrangement will be reversed alternatively and the choral reaching will be repeatedly done to enable the children master the words and the sentences therein. In this way, the children will not only learn to pronounce the words but intuitively master the way lexical items are joined together to form sentences or the rules that govern the formation of simple sentence structure. This will help to improve their skills in public speaking and bring about increase in their mental lexicon.

## 6. Summary of findings/conclusion

The use of mother tongue in the teaching and learning of children in their early childhood education cannot be over emphasized. It contributes to the overall of the language acquisition of a child. Though rhythm, children are made to capture the alterative and assonance sounds inherent in the successive lexical items being continually repeated. This enables them to master the pronunciation of these repeated lexical items and memorise the consonant and vowel sounds inherent in them. This helps to improve their phonological output and makes the pronunciation of these alphabets easy and very fluent for them. Again through choral speaking, they not only learn to read very fluently but becomes perfect in public speaking as this helps the shy ones to loosen up. Above all, the series of interactive activities the teacher engages them in helps in increasing their mental lexicon and prepares them as future orators.

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