



**TETF and Centre of Excellence for Applying Indigenous Languages in Pedagogy**

**Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo.**

**Assessing the Effectiveness of Indigenous Languages in Nursery Rhyme  
Education in Selected Nursery and Primary Schools in Ondo City**

**By**

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**Abstract**

This study explores the utilization of indigenous languages in the instruction of nursery rhymes within selected nursery and primary schools in Ondo City, Nigeria. Its primary objectives include assessing the extent of indigenous language integration, evaluating its influence on students' literacy development and cultural awareness, and identifying the challenges and opportunities associated with incorporating local languages into early childhood education. Employing a descriptive survey methodology, data were gathered from 30 teachers across ten schools, comprising five public and five private institutions, using questionnaires, classroom observations, and informal interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative responses were examined thematically. The findings indicate that indigenous languages are moderately utilized, with public schools demonstrating higher frequency of use compared to private institutions. Teachers largely concur that nursery rhymes delivered in pupils' mother tongues enhance comprehension, phonological skills, engagement, and cultural identity. Nonetheless, implementation faces obstacles such as insufficient instructional materials, limited teacher training, and societal preferences for English. The study concludes that integrating indigenous languages into nursery rhymes can serve as a potent strategy for fostering early literacy and cultural preservation. It recommends curriculum reform, targeted teacher training, and increased parental awareness to promote mother-tongue instruction and cultivate culturally responsive early childhood education in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Languages, Nursery Rhymes, Nursery and Primary Schools, Early Childhood Education, Ondo City

## **Introduction**

Language is the principal medium through which knowledge, culture, and values are transmitted across generations. In African societies, indigenous languages form the foundation of identity, worldview, and collective memory. Therefore, the use of indigenous languages in early childhood education serves not only as a pedagogical tool but also as a means of preserving cultural heritage and fostering holistic development (Nsamenang, 2004; Semali, 1999).

Nursery rhymes are among the earliest educational tools introduced to children, helping to develop rhythm, phonics, vocabulary, and storytelling skills. Traditionally, such rhymes in African communities carry deep cultural significance and have been used to teach morals, customs, history, and language. However, formal education systems across Africa, particularly in Nigeria, have largely replaced indigenous rhymes with Western ones, often delivered in colonial languages such as English or French. This shift in both language and cultural content risks disconnecting children from their linguistic heritage and may hinder their early cognitive, emotional, and cultural development (Fasokun, Katahoire, & Oduaran, 2005).

As Maurial (1999) observes, indigenous knowledge is rooted in lived experience and continuously evolves in response to changing realities. It is holistic in nature, encompassing the social, spiritual, and material dimensions of life. Nursery rhymes, when rendered in indigenous languages, become powerful vessels for this knowledge, embedding linguistic structures, moral values, and communal identity in forms that children easily memorize and internalize.

Von Kotze (2002) refers to this kind of knowledge as “working knowledge”, a body of insights passed down through oral tradition and shaped by lived experience. This includes survival strategies, moral guidance, ecological awareness, and social organization, all of which can be communicated through culturally grounded nursery rhymes. Using indigenous languages to teach these rhymes helps children construct meaning in familiar cultural contexts, thereby enhancing inclusivity and learning effectiveness (Beckloff, 2009).

Despite these benefits, indigenous knowledge systems and languages remain undervalued in formal education. They are often perceived as inferior to Western epistemologies, a binary that frames African indigenous knowledge as ‘traditional and unverified,’ and Western knowledge as ‘modern and scientific’ (Mwadime, 1999). This perspective not only marginalizes local languages and knowledge systems but also diminishes the intellectual and educational potential of African oral traditions, including nursery rhymes.

It is against this backdrop that the present study investigates the use of indigenous languages in the teaching of nursery rhymes in selected nursery and primary schools in Ondo City, Ondo State. The study aims at highlighting the educational and cultural benefits of teaching nursery rhymes in children's mother tongues. Furthermore, it advocates for a more integrated educational model, one that values indigenous knowledge systems alongside global ones, enabling children to grow up firmly rooted in their culture while meaningfully engaging with the wider world.

## **Specific Objectives**

The objectives of the study are:

- i. to examine the extent to which indigenous languages are used in teaching nursery rhymes in selected nursery and primary schools in Ondo City.
- ii. to assess the impact of teaching nursery rhymes in indigenous languages on pupils' literacy development and cultural awareness.
- iii. to identify the challenges and opportunities associated with the use of indigenous languages in early childhood classrooms.

### **Contributions to Knowledge**

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on indigenous language preservation, early childhood education, and culturally responsive pedagogy in Nigeria and the wider African context. By focusing on the use of indigenous languages in the teaching of nursery rhymes, the study provides empirical insights into how language and culture intersect in foundational learning environments. It underscores the educational value of using mother tongues in early literacy development. It highlights how indigenous language instruction, particularly through familiar oral traditions like nursery rhymes, can improve children's comprehension, phonological awareness, and emotional engagement with learning materials.

The study further contributes to cultural preservation by documenting and advocating for the integration of traditional knowledge systems and oral heritage into formal school curricula. In doing so, it challenges the dominance of Western epistemologies in early education and promotes the legitimacy and richness of African indigenous knowledge systems. It also has practical significance for curriculum planners, educators, and policymakers. By identifying the benefits and challenges of using indigenous languages in the classroom, the findings can inform the development of more inclusive and culturally grounded educational policies and teaching strategies, particularly within Nigeria's multilingual context.

Ultimately, the study seeks to support a shift toward an educational framework that not only values linguistic diversity but also fosters children's cultural identity, cognitive growth, and social integration from an early age. This contribution is especially relevant in contemporary efforts to decolonize education and promote sustainable, locally relevant teaching practices.

### **Literature Review**

Indigenous languages are a critical component of identity, culture, and cognitive development in early childhood. Scholars agree that a child's first language, the mother tongue, forms the foundation for learning and should be the medium of instruction, particularly in the early years of education (UNESCO, 2003). According to Bamgbose (1991), using indigenous languages in teaching enhances understanding and facilitates knowledge construction within culturally familiar frameworks. Similarly, Adegbija (2004) argues that instruction in the mother tongue promotes literacy and improves long-term academic performance, as children are more likely to grasp and retain concepts when taught in a language they speak at home. Despite these advantages, many African countries, including Nigeria, continue to prioritize colonial languages like English and French in their educational systems. This policy, according to Owu-Ewie (2006), creates a disconnect between children and their immediate linguistic and cultural environment, thereby limiting educational access and engagement, especially in the foundational years.

Nursery rhymes have long been recognized as effective tools for early literacy, phonemic awareness, vocabulary building, and social development. According to Opaluwah (2012), nursery rhymes engage children through rhythm, repetition, and storytelling, features that support language acquisition and memory retention. They also introduce young learners to the sounds and structures of language in enjoyable and meaningful ways. In many African cultures, nursery rhymes go beyond educational function to carry significant cultural and moral messages. As observed by Nsamenang (2004), traditional rhymes in African societies were used not only to entertain children but also to teach communal values, history, and survival skills. However, with the increasing dominance of Western nursery rhymes in African classrooms, many of these culturally embedded songs and stories are being sidelined or forgotten.

Integrating indigenous languages with oral traditions such as nursery rhymes can enrich early childhood education by grounding instruction in culturally relevant content. Maurial (1999) explains that indigenous knowledge, including songs, riddles, and proverbs, is a form of "living knowledge" that is passed down through generations and adapted to fit contemporary realities. Von Kotze (2002) describes this as "working knowledge," shaped by daily experiences and environmental interactions. Using nursery rhymes in indigenous languages creates opportunities for children to learn through familiar linguistic and cultural patterns. This method aligns with the principles of culturally responsive teaching, which encourage educators to validate and incorporate students' cultural backgrounds into classroom practices (Gay, 2010). According to Beckloff (2009), such an approach fosters inclusiveness, enhances student participation, and strengthens identity development.

Despite the documented benefits, the use of indigenous languages in formal education faces numerous challenges. These include a lack of standardized orthography, insufficient teaching materials, inadequate teacher training, and policy inconsistencies (Fafunwa et al., 1989; Eze, 2014). Additionally, there is a widespread perception that proficiency in global languages, particularly English, is a prerequisite for socioeconomic advancement, leading many parents and educators to undervalue mother tongue education (Mothibeli, 2005). Moreover, the education system in Nigeria often lacks clear implementation strategies for the National Policy on Education, which recommends mother tongue instruction at the early stages of schooling. As a result, the gap between policy and practice continues to grow, with indigenous languages receiving limited support in classroom settings (Ogunwale, 2013).

In Nigeria, a country with over 500 languages, the challenge of incorporating indigenous languages into education is both complex and urgent. Scholars such as Afolayan (1999) and Oyetade (2007) have emphasized the need for a localized and multilingual approach to teaching in order to reflect the country's linguistic diversity. Nursery and primary school children, especially in culturally rich areas like Ondo City, stand to benefit immensely from learning materials, including nursery rhymes, delivered in their native languages. This literature suggests that promoting indigenous language through culturally embedded tools like nursery rhymes not only strengthens literacy but also contributes to identity formation and social cohesion. There is a clear need for research that evaluates how such practices are being implemented and the impact they have on learners and educators alike.

## **Methodology**

### Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive survey research design, which is appropriate for exploring and analyzing current practices, perceptions, and challenges associated with the use of indigenous languages in the teaching of nursery rhymes. The design enables the researcher to gather detailed data from educators and administrators within selected nursery and primary schools in Ondo City to understand the extent and impact of using mother tongue instruction at the foundational level of education.

### Population of the Study

The population of the study comprises selected nursery and lower primary school teachers in public and private schools within Ondo City, Ondo State, Nigeria. This group is targeted because they are directly involved in early childhood education and are most likely to engage with the use of nursery rhymes in classroom instruction.

### Sample and Sampling Technique

A sample of 10 schools (5 public and 5 private) was selected through purposive sampling, based on the criteria that these schools run full nursery and primary programmes and are within the geographical boundaries of Ondo City. From these schools, a total of 30 teachers were selected using simple random sampling.

### Research Instrument

The main instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled: "Use of Indigenous Language in Teaching Nursery Rhymes (UILTNR) questionnaire." The questionnaire was divided into four sections: Section A dwells on demographic information of respondents. Section B addresses frequency and extent of indigenous language use in teaching nursery rhymes. Section C explores the perceived impact on pupils' literacy and cultural identity. Section D explores challenges and suggestions for improvement.

### Method of Data Collection

The researcher visited the selected schools and administered the questionnaire personally to ensure clarity and completion. Observation of classroom sessions was also conducted during routine nursery rhyme activities. Informal interviews were held with a few teachers and headteachers to gain deeper insights into their practices and perspectives on indigenous language instruction.

### Method of Data Analysis

Data collected from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, percentages, and mean scores to summarize responses. Where applicable, inferential statistics such as chi-square tests were used to determine significant differences in responses based on school type (public vs. private). Qualitative data from observations and interviews were analyzed thematically and used to support or contrast quantitative findings.

## Data Interpretation and Discussion

TABLE A: Frequency of Indigenous Language Use

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Frequency of Use	No. of Teachers	%
Very Often 6		20%
Often 10		33.3%
Sometimes 8		26.7%
Rarely 4		13.3%
Never 2		6.7%

Mean Frequency Rating: 3.47 out of 5 (moderate use leaning toward "often"). In terms of Private and Public Trend, Public schools have 70% report using indigenous language "often" or "very often." Private schools have only 40% report regular use: mostly "sometimes" or "rarely."

TABLE B: Impact on Pupils' Literacy and Cultural Identity

Table C: Impact on Pupils' Literacy and Cultural Identity		
Statement	Mean Score (Max 5)	Interpretation
Pupils understand rhymes better in their mother tongue	4.3	Strongly Agree
Indigenous rhymes improve phonics and reading	4.0	Agree
Pupils show greater enthusiasm with local rhymes	4.2	Agree
Cultural identity is reinforced through native rhymes	4.4	Strongly Agree
Cultural identity is reinforced through native rhymes	3.8	Agree

There is a strong perceived impact of indigenous language use on engagement, comprehension, and identity. Analysis reveals moderate usage overall, with public schools more committed to local language instruction than private schools. Private schools tend to emphasize English more due to parental demands and perceived prestige. Strong agreement from educators shows that using indigenous rhymes increases comprehension, reinforces phonological awareness, boosts enthusiasm and participation, strengthens cultural identity formation. This supports earlier claims by Bamgbose (1991) and Adegbija (2004) about the cognitive and affective benefits of mother-tongue education. Findings mirror literature from Ogunwale (2013) and Eze (2014), especially in: Lack of resources, policy-practice disconnect, negative perceptions from parents and educators, teachers call for systemic support, curriculum reform, and community sensitization. While many teachers recognize the educational and cultural value of indigenous nursery rhymes, actual implementation remains inconsistent, especially in private schools. Despite policy recommendations, resource limitations, lack of formal training, and societal bias against local languages hinder widespread adoption. Nonetheless, the positive impact on literacy and identity affirms the need to strengthen support systems and advocate for inclusive, culturally grounded educational reforms.

### Recommendations

Government should produce standard rhymes in Yoruba and other languages. Also, more workshops and in-service training needed on mother-tongue instruction, let schools pair English with Yoruba versions of the same rhyme, and parents need to be educated on the importance of cultural identity in education.

## Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the use of indigenous languages in the teaching of nursery rhymes in selected nursery and primary schools in Ondo City. Drawing on the perspectives of early childhood educators, as well as observations of classroom practices, the study highlighted the current extent of indigenous language usage, its impact on learners, and the challenges faced in its implementation. Findings from the research affirm that teaching nursery rhymes in indigenous languages significantly supports early literacy development, improves comprehension, and strengthens cultural identity among young learners. Nursery rhymes, when taught in a child's mother tongue, become more than educational tools; they serve as a bridge between home and school, reinforcing familiar linguistic and cultural patterns that foster confidence, participation, and meaningful learning.

However, the study also revealed a number of systemic challenges, including limited instructional materials in indigenous languages, inadequate teacher training, and societal attitudes that privilege foreign languages over local ones. These factors contribute to the continued marginalization of indigenous languages in early childhood education, despite national policy recommendations promoting their use. The study underscores the need for a more intentional integration of indigenous languages into nursery and primary education. It calls on curriculum developers, policymakers, and educators to recognize the value of local languages and oral traditions, not only as tools of instruction but as vital components of a culturally responsive and inclusive education.

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