

The Effects of Mother Tongue and Gender on the Academic Performance of Social Studies Students in Delta State

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of Ukwuani as a mother tongue and gender on the academic performance of Upper Basic 8 Social Studies students. A quasi-experimental pre-test and post-test control group research design was employed, utilizing a 2x2 factorial design, where the first factor represented language (Ukwuani and English), and the second factor represented gender (male and female). The population consisted of 80,912 Upper Basic 8 students across 453 public schools in Delta State, Nigeria. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 83 students, ensuring alignment with the study's quasi-experimental approach. The Social Studies Mother Tongue Test (SSMTT), adapted from past Basic Certificate Examinations (BCE), served as the research instrument. It comprised two sections: Section A collected demographic data, while Section B contained test items on selected Social Studies topics Marriage and Drug Abuse. The instrument underwent rigorous validation by subject experts and exhibited high reliability, as confirmed by Cronbach's alpha technique. The study was conducted over a six-week period during the third term of the 2023/2024 academic session, with data analysed using descriptive Statistics to answer the research questions, and t-tests to test hypotheses. Findings revealed a significant difference in the academic performance of students taught in Ukwuani versus English, confirming the benefits of mother tongue instruction in enhancing comprehension and retention. Additionally, gender did not moderate this effect, indicating that both male and female students benefited equally. These findings emphasize the need for mother tongue-based instruction in Social Studies and contribute to the discourse on language policy and gender equity in education.

Keywords: Mother Tongue, Ukwuani Language, Academic Performance, Social Studies, Gender and Delta State.

Introduction

Academic performance is a multidimensional construct that encompasses students' ability to acquire knowledge, apply learned concepts, and demonstrate competence in various academic tasks. According to [Adeyemi and Olaleye \(2021\)](#) and [Atubi \(2021\)](#), academic performance is the outcome of education the extent to which a student, teacher, or institution achieves educational goals. It is often measured through standardized assessments, classroom participation, and other evaluative tools that assess comprehension, critical thinking, and application of knowledge. In Social Studies education, academic performance reflects students' understanding of societal structures, governance, cultural dynamics, and historical narratives. According to [Johnson and Peters \(2022\)](#), Social Studies is an interdisciplinary subject that fosters civic responsibility, social cohesion, and national development. Therefore, academic performance in this field is not only about mastering content but also about developing the skills necessary to analyse social issues critically and contribute meaningfully to society.

Academic performance in Social Studies is crucial as it shapes students' ability to engage with the world around them. According to [Brown and Smith \(2020\)](#), strong performance in Social Studies helps students develop civic consciousness, understand democratic principles, and appreciate cultural diversity. Social Studies provides a foundation for informed decision-making, equipping students with the knowledge to participate actively in governance and community development. Furthermore, academic success in Social Studies fosters essential cognitive and analytical skills. [Okonkwo \(2021\)](#) posited that students who excel in Social Studies demonstrate higher levels of problem-solving ability, critical thinking, and effective communication. These competencies are not only vital for academic excellence but also for real-world applications such as conflict resolution, policy-making, and social advocacy. Additionally, high academic performance in Social Studies contributes to national development. [Ibrahim and Yusuf \(2023\)](#) claim that when students excel in Social Studies, they develop a deeper understanding of societal structures, which prepares them for leadership roles. Education systems that prioritize Social Studies contribute to producing informed citizens who can drive social change and economic progress.

The consequences of poor academic performance in Social Studies are far-reaching, affecting both individual students and society at large. According to [Williams and Adewale \(2022\)](#), students who struggle academically in Social Studies often exhibit limited knowledge of civic responsibilities, leading to reduced civic engagement and political apathy. This disengagement can result in a populace that lacks the awareness and motivation to participate in governance and social reforms. Moreover, poor academic performance in Social Studies is linked to a lack of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. According to [Eze and Onwumere \(2021\)](#), students who perform poorly in Social Studies often find it challenging to analyse societal problems effectively. This deficiency affects their ability to contribute to discussions on social justice, environmental sustainability, and economic development. Consequently, a society with a high prevalence of students underperforming in Social Studies may struggle with issues such as poor governance, social inequality, and a lack of innovative solutions to pressing problems.

On a personal level, students who perform poorly in Social Studies may experience diminished self-esteem and reduced academic motivation. According to [Adebayo \(2020\)](#), academic struggles in Social Studies can contribute to a lack of interest in education, leading to higher dropout rates and limited career opportunities. Since Social Studies is foundational to disciplines such as law, political science, and public administration, poor performance can restrict students' access to professions that require a strong understanding of societal issues. Another critical effect of poor academic performance in Social Studies is the reinforcement of societal stereotypes and misinformation. [Okafor \(2023\)](#) is of the view that students who lack a strong foundation in Social Studies are more susceptible to misinformation and propaganda, as they lack the analytical skills necessary to evaluate sources critically. This vulnerability can lead to the perpetuation of biases, xenophobia, and intolerance, further deepening social divisions.

Language serves as the bedrock of learning and cognitive development, with mother tongue instruction playing a pivotal role in shaping students' academic performance. The use of indigenous languages as a medium of instruction enhances comprehension, engagement, and overall educational outcomes ([UNESCO, 2020](#)). In the context of Nigeria, where linguistic diversity is profound, the role of mother tongue education, particularly Ukwuani, in students' academic performance remains a subject of growing interest. This paper explores how Ukwuani language influences students' learning, emphasizing its benefits, challenges, and overall impact on academic achievement.

Mother tongue instruction fosters better conceptual understanding by allowing students to relate academic content to familiar linguistic and cultural contexts. When students learn in their native language, they experience improved cognitive retention and critical thinking skills ([Oyetunde, 2019](#)). Ukwuani, as a language indigenous to Delta State, provides a means for students to express complex ideas comfortably, enhancing classroom participation and reducing anxiety associated with second-language learning. Additionally, research has shown that early education in the mother tongue facilitates literacy acquisition, making the transition to additional languages smoother ([Ajayi & Adeyemo, 2018](#)). When students first master literacy in Ukwuani, they build a strong linguistic foundation that aids in their ability to learn other subjects effectively, including English and mathematics.

Academic performance is a crucial indicator of educational success, and language plays an indispensable role in shaping students' learning experiences. [Oladipo and Faleye \(2021\)](#) opined that students taught in their mother tongue exhibit higher levels of comprehension, critical analysis, and problem-solving abilities compared to those instructed in a foreign language. The use of Ukwuani in classroom settings enables students to grasp Social Studies concepts more efficiently by reducing language barriers that often impede learning. Furthermore, mother tongue instruction promotes inclusivity in education. Many students from Ukwuani-speaking backgrounds struggle with English proficiency, which affects their confidence and willingness to participate in classroom discussions. Fostering linguistic inclusion by integrating Ukwuani into formal education enhances students' self-esteem and engagement, leading to better academic outcomes ([Nwachukwu, 2020](#)).

Despite its benefits, implementing Ukwuani as a language of instruction presents several challenges. One major concern is the availability of instructional materials. [Eze and Madueke \(2022\)](#), claim that the lack of textbooks and teaching resources in indigenous languages hinders the effectiveness of mother tongue instruction. Teachers often struggle to find appropriate materials to teach subjects like Social Studies, limiting the full integration of Ukwuani into the curriculum. Another challenge is the reluctance of parents and educators to embrace mother tongue education. According to [Adebayo \(2021\)](#), many parents perceive English as the language of socioeconomic advancement and prefer their children to be instructed in English to increase global competitiveness. This societal preference often results in resistance to policies promoting indigenous language instruction, despite evidence supporting its academic benefits

Statement of the problem

Academic performance, often defined as the measurable outcomes of students' learning achievements in formal educational settings, serves as a key determinant of their intellectual growth and future opportunities. It is commonly assessed through standardized tests, coursework, and teacher evaluations, reflecting students' proficiency in various subjects. The importance of academic performance cannot be overstated, as it not only influences individual success but also contributes to the socio-economic development of a nation. High academic achievement is linked to better career prospects, critical thinking skills, and overall personal development.

In many educational systems, English is the primary language of instruction, particularly in Nigeria, where it serves as the official medium for teaching and learning. While English facilitates national and international communication, its dominance in the classroom often presents significant challenges for students whose first language differs from it. Research suggests that when students are taught in a language, they are not proficient in, their cognitive processing, comprehension, and engagement with academic content may be hindered, ultimately affecting their performance. This linguistic barrier is particularly evident among students from indigenous language-speaking backgrounds, such as Ukwuani speakers.

Ukwuani, a language spoken by a significant population in Delta State, Nigeria, plays a fundamental role in shaping students' cognitive and communicative abilities. As a mother tongue, Ukwuani provides students with a familiar linguistic framework, which may enhance comprehension, facilitate knowledge retention, and improve critical thinking skills. Studies have shown that the use of mother tongue in early education fosters a deeper understanding of subject matter, reduces learning anxiety, and strengthens student engagement. Therefore, integrating Ukwuani as a supportive medium in the educational process may positively influence students' academic performance by bridging linguistic gaps, improving concept internalization, and fostering better participation in the learning process.

However, despite the potential benefits of mother tongue instruction, the extent to which Ukwuani as a first language affects students' academic performance remains largely unexplored. Given the increasing emphasis on English as the dominant instructional language, there is a need to critically examine whether the use of Ukwuani could serve as an academic advantage or a hindrance. This study seeks to investigate the effects of Ukwuani language as a mother tongue and gender on students' academic performance.

Research Questions

1. What is the difference in the academic performance of Social Studies Upper Basic students taught with Ukwuani language as mother tongue and those taught with English language?
2. How will gender moderate the effect of Ukwuani language as a mother tongue and the academic performance of Upper Basic Students in Social Studies?

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant difference in the academic performance of Social Studies Upper Basic students taught with Ukwuani language as mother tongue and those taught with English language.
2. Gender did not moderate the effect of Ukwuani language as mother tongue and academic performance of Upper Basic Students in Social Studies.

Methods

This study employed a quasi-experimental pre-test and post-test control group research design. This involved the implementation of pre-test and post-test assessments on both experimental and control groups within randomized classes. This design choice facilitated the utilization of a factorial design denoted as 2x2. The 2 represents the two languages which are Ukwuani and English language used for this study. The second 2 represent gender (male and female). The study's targeted population encompassed all Upper Basic 8 Social Studies students in Delta State, totaling 80,912 students during the 2023/2024 academic session. These students are distributed across 453 public upper-basic schools, as documented by the Ministry of Basic Education in

Asaba (2023). This educational landscape was spread across the geographical expanse of the state, covering the three distinct senatorial districts: Delta North, with 168 public secondary schools; Delta Central, with 187; and Delta South, with 116 public secondary schools. The study employed a purposive sampling strategy, a sample of 83 students from Upper Basic 8 Social Studies were meticulously chosen to suit the requirements of the study. The decision to opt for this sample size was calculated, aligning it with the quasi-experimental nature of the research.

The instrument for data collection in this study was a Social Studies Mother Tongue Test (SSMTT), a comprehensive assessment designed to measure participants' academic proficiency. Drawing from the wealth of past Social Studies questions from the Basic Certificate Examinations (BCE) administered by the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education in Asaba, Delta State, and the SSMTT was carefully curated. The instrument contained two sections A and B respectively. Section A consists of the required demographic information from correspondents, gender. Section B contained test items on the mother tongue drawn from two topics "Marriage and Drug Abuse. The validation process for the Social Studies Mother Tongue Test (SSMTT) underwent both face and content validity assessments, involving a panel of experts and experienced Social Studies educators. This comprehensive validation aimed to ensure the reliability and appropriateness of the instrument for the study. The reliability of the SSMTT was carried out using Cronbach alpha technique; to achieve this, fifty copies of the instrument were administered in a single administration.

The data collected during the pre-test and post-test phases were subjected to rigorous statistical analysis, this is to accurately investigate the significance and impact of mother tongue on the academic performance of students in Social Studies. The research questions were answered using descriptive Statistics of mean and standard deviation while to test all null hypotheses, the researcher employed t-test.

Result and Discussion

Research Question 1: What is the difference in the academic performance of Social Studies Upper Basic students taught with Ukwuani language as mother tongue and those taught with English language?

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviation showing the difference in the Academic Performance of Social Studies Upper Basic Students taught with Ukwuani Language as Mother Tongue and those Taught with English Language.

Group	N	Pre-Test		Post-Test		Mean Gain
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Ukwuani	33	50.24	12.10	83.39	6.25	33.15
Control	50	71.08	6.68	73.01	9.71	93

Table 1 presents the result for the effect of using Ukwuani language as a mother tongue for teaching upper basic students' social studies. This was shown by the difference in the academic performance of Social Studies Upper Basic students taught with Ukwuani language as mother tongue and those taught with English language. The post-test mean score for the Ukwuani group was 83.39, while that of the English language (control) group was 73.01. This difference clearly shows the positive effect of using mother tongue for teaching as it brings the student's closer home. Also, this group performance might be due to the fact that Ukwuani language is taught as the local language in the schools around the area. The effect of mother tongue on the academic performance of Upper Basic Social Studies students, as compared to a control group differed. According to the data presented in the table, both the experimental group (taught with Ukwuani language) and the control group underwent a pre-test to assess their initial understanding of the topics. Before teaching with mother tongue, the mean score of students in the Ukwuani group was 50.24, with a standard deviation of 12.10, indicating moderate performance with no variability among students. The control group, which were taught with English language, had a higher pre-test mean score of 71.08, with a standard deviation of 6.68, suggesting a slightly higher baseline of understanding.

After teaching with Ukwuani language, the group experienced a dramatic performance improvement. Also, the mean gain of 33.15 a wide measure of the difference between pre-test and post-test score further give credence to the effect of mother tongue (Ukwuani language) as compared to the control group (English language). The significant effect of this results was tested in hypothesis 1.

Research Question 2: How does gender moderate the effect of the Ukwani language as a mother tongue and the academic performance of Upper Basic Students in Social Studies?

Table 2. Mean and Standard Deviation Showing the Moderating Effect of Gender on Ukwuani Language as Mother Tongue and Academic Performance of Upper Basic Students in Social Studies.

	SES	N	Mean	SD
Posttest	Female	17	81.64	6.17
	Male	16	85.25	5.97

Table 2 shows the moderating effect of gender on Ukwuani language and academic performance of Social Studies upper basic students in Delta State. The table shows the difference in the mean scores of female and male students, with male students performing slightly higher than female students. Male students had a post-test mean of 85.25 as against the posttest mean of female students of 81.64. The male students experienced a reasonable increase in their academic performance. However, the mean gain was approximately 3.61. This suggested that, male students had a higher academic performance as against the mean score of female students, whether this difference is significant or not was determined by the results of hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in the academic performance of Social Studies Upper Basic students taught with Ukwuani language as mother tongue and those taught with English language.

Table 3. T-test Table Showing Significant Difference in the Academic Performance of Social Studies Students taught with Ukwuani Language as Mother Tongue and those taught with English Language.

Group	N	Mean	df	t-calculated	t-critical	Decision
Ukwuani	33	83.39	81	-0.356		
English	50	73.08		-0.403	0.000	Rejected

Table 3 shows the test for hypothesis 1, that there is no significant difference in the academic performance of Social Studies Upper Basic students taught with Ukwuani language as mother tongue and those taught in English language. The results showed that the treatment variable (Ukwuani language) had a statistically significant impact on students' academic performance, as indicated by a p significant value of .000, which is less than the significant level of 0.05. This implies that the use of mother tongue contributed to a significant difference in academic performance between the both groups. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative that there is significant difference in the academic performance of Social Studies Upper Basic students taught with Ukwuani language as mother tongue and those taught English language is accepted.

On the other hand, the control group did not have a significant effect on academic performance. This indicates that the control group did not experience significantly effect on the academic performance of the students. Overall, the findings suggest that incorporating mother tongue (Ukwuani) into Social Studies education can have a positive and significant effect on the academic performance of students in Upper Basic Social Studies

Hypothesis 2: Gender did not moderate the effect of Ukwuani language as mother tongue and academic performance of Upper Basic Students in Social Studies.

Table 4. T-test Table Showing the Moderating Effect of gender on Ukwuani Language as Mother Tongue and Academic Performance of Upper Basic Students in Social Studies.

Group	N	Mean	df	t-calculated	t-critical	Decision
Ukwuani	17	81.64	31	1.70		
English	16	85.25		1.70	0.669	Accepted

Table 4. revealed the moderating effect of gender on Ukwuani language as mother tongue and academic performance of upper basic Social Studies students in Delta State. The table reveals a non-significant effect among the variables, with a p value of .669, since the obtained p-value of .669 is far higher than the 0.05 level of significance, gender did not moderate the effect of Ukwuani language as the mother tongue and academic performance of Upper Basic Students in Social Studies. The null hypothesis is hereby accepted.

Discussion of the Findings

The first finding revealed that there is a significant difference in the academic performance of Social Studies Upper Basic students taught in Ukwuani as a mother tongue and those taught in English suggested that language of instruction plays a crucial role in student learning outcomes. This result aligns with existing research on the benefits of mother tongue education, particularly in enhancing comprehension and knowledge retention. One plausible reason for this difference is that students tend to grasp concepts more effectively when taught in a language they are proficient in. Since Ukwuani is the students' first language, they are likely to

process information more naturally, leading to better understanding and engagement with Social Studies concepts. In contrast, students taught in English especially those with limited proficiency in the language may struggle with both language comprehension and subject matter, thereby impacting their academic performance.

Additionally, cognitive load theory suggests that when students learn in an unfamiliar language, their cognitive resources are split between understanding the language and grasping the content. This dual burden can hinder learning efficiency. On the other hand, instruction in Ukwuani eliminates this linguistic barrier, allowing students to focus fully on the subject matter, thereby improving their performance. This finding is supported by Cummins (2021), who argued that students achieve higher academic success when foundational learning occurs in their mother tongue before transitioning to a second language. This reinforces the idea that using Ukwuani as a medium of instruction can enhance academic outcomes in Social Studies.

The second finding shows that gender did not moderate the effect of Ukwuani language as a mother tongue on the academic performance of Upper Basic students in Social Studies suggests that both male and female students benefitted (or were impacted) in a similar manner regardless of their gender. This implies that the relationship between the use of Ukwuani as a mother tongue and students' academic achievement in Social Studies remained consistent across gender lines. One plausible reason for this result is that language acquisition and cognitive processing are not inherently gender-dependent. Research in psycholinguistics and educational psychology indicates that both boys and girls generally develop linguistic abilities through similar cognitive mechanisms. Thus, if the use of Ukwuani as a mother tongue influences academic performance, it is likely to do so in a uniform manner for both genders.

Additionally, Social Studies as a subject is largely conceptual and context-driven, focusing on societal values, governance, and cultural understanding. Since the subject is deeply rooted in real-life experiences and familiar contexts, students regardless of gender may find it easier to grasp Social Studies concepts when taught in a language they are proficient in. This is in line with the linguistic relativity hypothesis, which posits that individuals understand and interpret the world more effectively when information is processed in their first language. Consequently, the use of Ukwuani in instruction may have benefitted all students equally, explaining why gender did not moderate the effect.

Furthermore, in many Nigerian cultural settings, both male and female students receive similar foundational exposure to their mother tongue, especially in early childhood before formal schooling. This shared linguistic background likely ensured that the influence of Ukwuani language on their academic performance in Social Studies was not significantly different between genders. Unlike subjects such as Mathematics or Sciences, where gender-based performance disparities are sometimes observed due to socio-cultural factors and stereotypes, Social Studies is relatively neutral in terms of gender influence. Supporting this assertion, Baker (2021) emphasized that mother tongue instruction enhances comprehension and critical thinking across genders, as both male and female students experience cognitive advantages when learning in a familiar linguistic environment. This further explains why gender did not play a moderating role in this study.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the critical role of language of instruction in shaping students' academic performance in Social Studies. The first finding, which established a significant difference in the academic performance of students taught in Ukwuani as a mother tongue and those taught in English, reinforces the argument that students learn better when instruction is delivered in a language they are proficient in. Furthermore, the second finding, which revealed that gender did not moderate the effect of Ukwuani as a mother tongue on students' academic performance, suggests that the benefits of mother tongue instruction are equally distributed across male and female students.

Implication for the Study

1. This study provides empirical evidence that mother tongue instruction significantly improves academic performance in Social Studies, reinforcing the cognitive and pedagogical advantages of using indigenous languages in education.
2. The study challenges common assumptions about gender differences in learning outcomes by demonstrating that the benefits of mother tongue instruction are uniform across male and female students, contributing to gender equity discourse in education.

Recommendations

1. Educational policymakers should consider implementing mother tongue-based instruction in early education to enhance students' comprehension and overall performance. Schools in Ukwuani-speaking regions should integrate the language into teaching Social Studies and other humanities subjects.
2. Since gender does not moderate the effect of mother tongue instruction, equal opportunities should be provided for both male and female students without bias in language-based educational interventions.

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