




Original Research

The Relationship Between Mother-Tongue Instruction and English Language Achievement Among Secondary School Students in Faskari Local Government Area of Katsina State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between mother-tongue instruction and English language achievement among secondary school students in Faskari Local Government Area of Katsina State, Nigeria. Guided by Cummins' Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis, the study examined how the use of students' first language influences comprehension, vocabulary development, and classroom participation during English language lessons. A correlational research design was adopted. The population comprised all secondary school students in Faskari LGA, from which a sample of 345 students was selected using stratified random sampling. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire validated by experts and tested for reliability, yielding a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.88. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data, while Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was employed to test the hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed a strong and significant positive relationship between mother-tongue instruction and students' comprehension, vocabulary development, and classroom participation. These results indicate that strategic use of the mother tongue enhances students' understanding, promotes active classroom engagement, and supports English language learning. The study concludes that mother-tongue instruction, when systematically integrated with English teaching, serves as an effective pedagogical strategy for improving English language achievement among secondary school students. It is therefore recommended that educational policymakers and teachers encourage structured bilingual instructional practices to enhance learning outcomes in secondary schools.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The choice of language for classroom instruction is central to learners' access to education and the quality of their academic outcomes, particularly in multilingual contexts. Extensive theoretical and empirical research on second-language acquisition (SLA) highlights the role of the first language (L1) in supporting the development of a second language (L2). Cummins's Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis explains that

cognitive and academic skills acquired through the mother tongue can transfer positively to L2 learning, enabling learners to build English proficiency on a solid L1 foundation (Cummins, 1979, 2000). African scholars further argue that language-of-instruction decisions are not only pedagogical but also political, yet they are often poorly implemented within education systems (Brock-Utne, 2014). However, the studies show that learners who receive initial or supportive instruction in indigenous languages such as Hausa, Igbo, or Yoruba demonstrate better comprehension, retention, and overall academic performance, including in English (Oribabor & Adesina, 2013; Charity, 2023; Obiakor, 2024). Research in Hausa-speaking areas reveals that strategic use of Hausa enhances reading development, classroom participation, and smoother transitions to English, especially for learners who struggle in English-only classrooms (Ngole et al., 2024). Similarly, Adams et al. (2024) emphasize that L1 use strengthens linguistic and metalinguistic skills necessary for effective English learning at the secondary school level.

Nevertheless, scholars caution that unregulated or excessive use of the mother tongue may lead to negative transfer, where L1 structures interfere with English usage (Hassan et al., 2025; Charity, 2023). To address this, researchers advocate structured bilingual strategies, such as introducing complex concepts in L1 before shifting to English, using contrastive analysis, and employing guided translation to encourage positive transfer while minimizing errors (Cummins, 2000). Evidence from Nigerian classrooms indicates that deliberate code-switching improves lesson clarity, learner engagement, and gradual English mastery, provided it complements rather than replaces sustained English exposure (Bamidele, 2023; Jegede, 2024).

At the policy level, Nigeria's language-in-education framework promotes the use of indigenous languages in early schooling with a gradual transition to English, but implementation remains uneven across regions (Seid, 2019; Obiakor, 2024; Phakeng, 2016). As a result, many secondary school students enter higher levels with varied linguistic backgrounds and inconsistent instructional experiences (Mohammad et al., 2024). In contexts such as Faskari Local Government Area, understanding how teachers interpret language policy, apply mother-tongue strategies, and respond to learners' prior linguistic experiences is essential for accurately assessing the impact of mother-tongue instruction on English achievement (Charity, 2023). Consequently, effective bilingual education requires attention to local language practices, teacher preparation, resource availability, and community attitudes, alongside clear transition plans and sustained professional development, as emphasized by Brock-Utne (2014) and Cummins (2000).

1.1. Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on Cummins' Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis (1979, 2000), which posits that proficiency developed in a learner's first language (L1) can positively transfer to the acquisition and development of a second language (L2). According to the theory, cognitive and academic skills acquired through the mother tongue, such as comprehension strategies, vocabulary knowledge, and metalinguistic awareness, form a common underlying proficiency that supports learning in another language. Adekola et al. (2018) stated that, within the context of English language learning, the theory emphasizes that effective use of mother-tongue instruction enhances learners' understanding of subject content and language concepts, thereby improving English language achievement. Learners who receive structured instruction in their native language are better able to process complex concepts, reduce cognitive overload, and transfer these skills when learning English as a second language (Okafor et al., 2026; Ranjbar & Nasiri, 2024).

However, this indicates that learners exposed to bilingual instructional strategies, including scaffolding, guided translation, and strategic code-switching, demonstrate higher comprehension, vocabulary development, and overall academic performance in English compared to learners taught exclusively through English (Benson, 2010; Benson, 2022; Baker, 2011; Heugh, 2011; Wong et al., 2024). In African multilingual contexts, research has shown that early mother-tongue instruction facilitates deeper conceptual understanding and leads to improved performance in English and other school subjects (Cummins, 2001; Ouane & Glanz, 2010; Zondi, 2025). This suggests that the strategic integration of mother-tongue instruction is not a barrier but a facilitator of English language development. In this study, the independent variable is Mother-Tongue Instruction, while the dependent variable is English Language Achievement. The theory explains how skills developed through mother-tongue instruction can transfer to English learning outcomes. The framework further recognizes instructional strategies (such as scaffolding and guided translation) as mediating variables, and teacher competence and learning environment as moderating variables that influence the strength of this relationship.

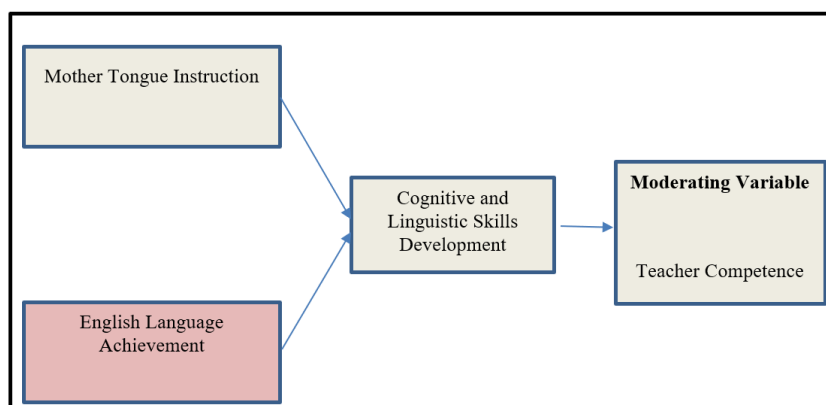


Figure 1. Cummins linguistic interdependence hypothesis

The model in Figure 1 shows that mother-tongue instruction enhances students' cognitive and linguistic skills, which in turn improves their English language achievement. This relationship is influenced by teacher competence and the classroom learning environment, supporting the idea that skills developed in the first language transfer positively to learning English.

1.2. Statement of the problem

Despite continuous efforts by teachers and policymakers to improve English language performance in Nigerian secondary schools, students in many rural areas, including Faskari Local Government Area of Katsina State, continue to record low achievement in English. Many learners in this context grow up using their mother tongue, primarily Hausa, as their dominant language of communication. As a result, English is introduced to them as a second language within the school environment, often with limited exposure outside the classroom. Boonsuk & Fang (2026) and Sun (2026) stated that the challenge emerges when English is taught strictly through the English-only approach, disregarding the linguistic background of learners. While Iqbal (2016) added that, this may create learning barriers, reduce comprehension, and limit students' ability to grasp key literacy skills.

Although several studies in Nigeria and elsewhere have shown that mother-tongue instruction can support better understanding and enhance learning outcomes, it is still unclear how such practices influence English language achievement among secondary school students in Faskari. Egwaoje (2024) stated that teachers differ in their use of mother tongue during instruction; some rely heavily on it for explanation and classroom interaction, while others avoid it completely. Yet, the actual effect of these practices on students' mastery of English concepts, vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and overall academic performance has not been systematically examined in this locality. This study, therefore, seeks to address the gap by investigating the impact of mother-tongue instruction on English language achievement among secondary school students in Faskari Local Government Area.

1.3. Research objectives

1. To determine the relationship between mother-tongue instruction and students' comprehension during English language lessons in secondary schools in Faskari Local Government Area, Katsina State.
2. To examine the relationship between mother-tongue instruction and students' vocabulary development during English language lessons in secondary schools in Faskari Local Government Area, Katsina State.
3. To investigate the relationship between mother-tongue instruction and students' classroom participation during English language lessons in secondary schools in Faskari Local Government Area, Katsina State.

1.4. Research questions

1. What is the relationship between mother-tongue instruction and students' comprehension during English language lessons in secondary schools in Faskari Local Government Area, Katsina State?
2. What is the relationship between mother-tongue instruction and students' vocabulary development during English language lessons in secondary schools in Faskari Local Government Area, Katsina State?

3. What is the relationship between mother-tongue instruction and students' classroom participation during English language lessons in secondary schools in Faskari Local Government Area, Katsina State?

1.5. Hypotheses

1. There is no significant relationship between mother-tongue instruction and students' comprehension during English language lessons in secondary schools in Faskari Local Government Area, Katsina State.
2. There is no significant relationship between mother-tongue instruction and students' vocabulary development during English language lessons in secondary schools in Faskari Local Government Area, Katsina State.
3. There is no significant relationship between mother-tongue instruction and students' classroom participation during English language

2. METHOD

This study adopted a correlational research design to examine the relationship between mother-tongue instruction and English language achievement among secondary school students in Faskari Local Government Area of Katsina State. The population consisted of all secondary school students in the area, who are primarily Hausa-speaking and learn English as a second language. A total of 345 students were selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation across schools, grades, and classes. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire with Likert-scale items that assessed mother-tongue instruction, students' comprehension, vocabulary development, and classroom participation. The instrument was validated by experts and pilot-tested, yielding a high reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha = 0.88). Questionnaires were administered in classrooms with permission from school authorities, and students were assured of confidentiality and voluntary participation. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics through Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) to test the hypotheses at a 0.05 significance level. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, anonymity, and voluntary participation, were strictly observed throughout the study.

3. RESULTS

The result presented in Table 1 shows the relationship between mother-tongue instruction and students' comprehension in secondary schools in Faskari Local Government Area of Katsina State. The analysis, based on responses from 340 students, revealed a very strong positive correlation between mother-tongue instruction and students' comprehension ($r = .981, p < .05$). This indicates that as the use of mother-tongue instruction increases, students' level of comprehension during lessons also increases. The mean scores further show that respondents generally agreed to the use of mother-tongue instruction ($M = 3.75, SD = 0.78$) and reported a high level of comprehension ($M = 3.65, SD = 0.88$). Since the significance value (.000) is less than 0.05, the relationship is statistically significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis stating that there is no significant relationship between mother-tongue instruction and students' comprehension is rejected.

Table 1. Summary of Pearson product-moment correlation (PPMC) statistics analysis on the relationship between mother-tongue instruction and students' comprehension in secondary schools in Faskari Local Government Area, Katsina State

Variables	N	M	SD	r	Sig. (2-tailed)	Remark
Mother-Tongue Instruction	340	3.75	0.78	.981**	.000	Significant
Students' comprehension	340	3.65	0.88	.981**	.000	Significant

Source: Research computation from field survey (2026).

Table 2. Summary of Pearson product-moment correlation (PPMC) statistics analysis on the relationship between mother-tongue instruction and vocabulary development in secondary schools in Faskari Local Government Area, Katsina State

Variables	N	M	SD	r	Sig. (2-tailed)	Remark
Mother-Tongue Instruction	345	3.68	0.86	.970**	.000	Significant
Vocabulary Development	345	3.65	0.88	.970**	.000	Significant

Source: Research computation from field survey (2026).

The results in Table 2 present the relationship between mother-tongue instruction and vocabulary development among secondary school students in Faskari Local Government Area of Katsina State. Using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation on data obtained from 345 respondents, the analysis revealed a very

strong positive relationship between mother-tongue instruction and students' vocabulary development ($r = .970, p < .05$). This implies that increased use of mother-tongue instruction is associated with improved vocabulary development among students. The mean scores indicate that students moderately agreed to the use of mother-tongue instruction ($M = 3.68, SD = 0.86$) and also reported a high level of vocabulary development ($M = 3.65, SD = 0.88$). Since the significance value (.000) is less than the 0.05 level of significance, the relationship is statistically significant. Consequently, the null hypothesis, which states that there is no significant relationship between mother-tongue instruction and vocabulary development, is rejected.

Table 3. Summary of Pearson product-moment correlation (PPMC) statistics analysis on the relationship between mother-tongue instruction and students' classroom participation in secondary schools in Faskari Local Government Area, Katsina State

Variables	N	M	SD	r	Sig. (2-tailed)	Remark
Mother-Tongue Instruction	345	3.75	0.78	.987**	.000	Significant
Students' Classroom Participation	345	3.68	0.86	.987**	.000	Significant

Source: Research computation from field survey (2026).

The results in Table 3 show the relationship between mother-tongue instruction and students' classroom participation in secondary schools in Faskari Local Government Area of Katsina State. Based on data collected from 345 respondents, the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation analysis revealed a very strong positive relationship between mother-tongue instruction and students' classroom participation ($r = .987, p < .05$). This suggests that increased use of mother-tongue instruction encourages active participation of students during classroom activities. The mean scores indicate that mother-tongue instruction was highly practised ($M = 3.75, SD = 0.78$), while students' classroom participation was also high ($M = 3.68, SD = 0.86$). Since the significance value (.000) is less than the 0.05 level of significance, the relationship is statistically significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis stating that there is no significant relationship between mother-tongue instruction and students' classroom participation is rejected.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed a strong and significant positive relationship between mother-tongue instruction and students' comprehension in secondary schools in Faskari Local Government Area of Katsina State. This implies that students comprehend lesson content better when instruction is delivered using their mother tongue. This finding supports the Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis proposed by Cummins (1979, 2000), which argues that cognitive and academic skills developed in a learner's first language can be transferred to a second language. When students understand concepts in their familiar language, it enhances deeper understanding and reduces cognitive load. Similarly, UNESCO (2016) emphasized that mother-tongue instruction promotes better understanding, especially at the early and intermediate stages of learning. The present finding also aligns with Benson (2014), who found that learners taught in their native language demonstrated higher comprehension and academic engagement than those taught exclusively in a second language.

The study further revealed a very strong positive relationship between mother-tongue instruction and students' vocabulary development. This suggests that the use of mother tongue in instruction significantly enhances students' vocabulary acquisition. This result is consistent with the findings of August & Shanahan (2006), who reported that strong vocabulary knowledge in the first language facilitates vocabulary development in a second language. Cummins (2001) also noted that conceptual knowledge and vocabulary learned in the mother tongue provide a foundation for second-language vocabulary growth. In the Nigerian context, studies such as Adegbija (2004) have shown that learners exposed to mother-tongue instruction tend to develop richer vocabularies, as familiar linguistic structures support meaning-making and word retention. Therefore, the present study confirms that mother-tongue instruction plays a vital role in enhancing students' vocabulary development.

In addition, the findings indicated a strong and significant relationship between mother-tongue instruction and students' classroom participation. This means that students are more actively involved in classroom discussions and activities when lessons are conducted in their mother tongue. This finding is in line with Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory, which emphasizes language as a key tool for social interaction and learning (Vygotsky, 1978). When students use a familiar language, they are more confident to ask questions, express ideas, and participate actively. This result is also supported by Brock-Utne (2007), who found that learners taught in their indigenous language were more interactive and participatory in classroom settings. Likewise, Alidou et al. (2006) reported that mother-tongue instruction encourages learner participation and reduces classroom anxiety, particularly in multilingual societies.

Overall, the findings of this study are consistent with previous empirical and theoretical studies which affirm that mother-tongue instruction enhances comprehension, vocabulary development, and classroom participation. The strong correlations observed in this study further validate the relevance of Cummins' Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis and reinforce the argument that the use of learners' first language is an effective strategy for improving English language achievement in secondary schools.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that mother-tongue instruction has a significant positive relationship with students' comprehension, vocabulary development, and classroom participation in secondary schools in Faskari Local Government Area of Katsina State. The strong correlations observed indicate that students understand lessons better, develop richer vocabulary, and participate more actively in classroom activities when instruction is delivered using their mother tongue. These findings support existing theories and empirical studies which emphasize the importance of learners' first language as a foundation for effective learning and second-language acquisition. Therefore, the study concludes that the integration of mother-tongue instruction alongside English language teaching is a valuable strategy for improving students' academic performance and overall learning experience in secondary schools.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Educational authorities should formally integrate mother-tongue instruction into secondary school teaching, especially at the introductory and explanatory stages of at the introductory and explanatory stages of English language lessons.
2. Teachers should be trained and retrained through workshops and seminars on effective strategies for using mother-tongue instruction to enhance students' comprehension and participation.
3. Relevant instructional materials such as textbooks, charts, and teaching aids should be developed in both the mother tongue and English to support effective teaching and learning.
4. Government and education policymakers should strengthen and enforce language-in-education policies that encourage the use of indigenous languages in schools.
5. Future researchers should conduct similar studies in other local government areas or states using different variables or research designs to validate and expand the findings of this study.

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DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The authors declare that this study was conducted without any personal, financial, or institutional conflict of interest. The research findings and interpretations were developed independently, solely for academic advancement, and were not influenced by any external party.

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ETHICAL STATEMENT

The study was carried out in accordance with accepted academic and ethical research standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was strictly maintained. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured that their identities and responses would be used strictly for academic purposes only.

AI USE STATEMENT

Artificial intelligence tools were used only as a supportive aid for language refinement, organization of ideas, and proofreading. All intellectual content, analysis, and interpretations were developed and verified by the authors, who take full responsibility for the originality and academic integrity of the work.

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