

## EXAMINING THE ROLE OF STORYTELLING IN LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AMONG PRESCHOOLERS IN LAGOS STATE

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### Abstract

*The preschool years are a critical stage for language development, during which children acquire foundational skills in vocabulary, comprehension, oral expression, and narrative competence. This study examined the role of storytelling in enhancing language development among preschool children in Lagos State, Nigeria. Guided by a quasi-experimental pre-test, post-test control group design, the study sampled 120 preschoolers from six schools across three local government areas. Participants were divided into an experimental group and a control group, with the experimental group exposed to structured storytelling activities. Data were collected using the Language Development Assessment Checklist (LDAC) and Teacher's Rating Scale (TRS), with reliability established at 0.76. Statistical analyses included paired and independent t-tests at a 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed that preschoolers in the experimental group showed significant improvement across all measured variables: vocabulary acquisition (Mean Difference = +13.47), listening comprehension (+14.46), oral expression (+13.63), and narrative skills (+13.82), with these improvements being statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ), compared to minimal gains in the control group. Independent t-test results further confirmed statistically significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) between the groups across all variables, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. It recommends the systematic integration of storytelling into early childhood curricula, teacher training programs, and home-based learning practices to maximise its benefits.*

**Keywords:** Storytelling, Language Development, Vocabulary, Listening Comprehension, Oral Expression, Narrative Skills

### Introduction

The early years of childhood are a critical period for language development, as children acquire the foundational skills necessary for communication, literacy, and cognitive growth. Among the various pedagogical approaches used in early childhood education, storytelling has remained a timeless and effective strategy for promoting language skills (Isbell *et. al.*, 2004). Storytelling, whether oral, visual, or interactive, offers preschool children opportunities to engage with vocabulary, sentence structures, and narrative forms in ways that enhance their linguistic competence, particularly through interactive and culturally relevant methods such as oral narratives and folktales (Nicolopoulou, 2010).

Particularly in Lagos State, preschool education is influenced by cultural diversity, urbanisation, and varying socio-economic conditions that affect children's exposure to language and literacy experiences (Akinbote, 2007). Storytelling, deeply embedded in African traditions, not only entertains but also teaches values, fosters creativity, and enhances social interaction (Adeyemi, 2016). Its role in language development, however, requires deeper academic exploration, especially as contemporary preschools face increasing pressure to prepare children for formal literacy in a rapidly globalising world.

Research evidence suggests that storytelling improves vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension, phonological awareness, and expressive language skills in preschoolers, particularly in settings where children face linguistic and socio-economic challenges, such as those in Lagos State (Haven & Ducey, 2007; Jalongo, 2014). In addition, stories provide a natural context for children to practice active listening and retelling, which are essential precursors to reading and writing (Wright, 2010). In multilingual environments such as Lagos,

storytelling may also serve as a bridge between home languages and English, the official medium of instruction, thereby fostering bilingual or multilingual proficiency (Ogunnaike, 2015).

The potential benefits of storytelling in Nigerian preschools face challenges, such as limited instructional time, inadequate training for teachers in oral narrative methods, and the growing dominance of digital media that competes for children's attention (Okonkwo, 2018). Understanding the specific contributions of storytelling to language development within Lagos State is therefore essential for informing curriculum design, teacher training, and policy implementation in early childhood education.

Language development in the preschool years is foundational to later literacy, academic achievement, and social communication (Snow *et al.*, 1998). In Nigeria, particularly in Lagos State, where cultural and linguistic diversity is high, ensuring effective language acquisition during early childhood is both a necessity and a challenge (Ogunnaike, 2015). Many children enter preschool with varying levels of exposure to English, indigenous languages, and digital media, leading to disparities in vocabulary, comprehension, and expressive abilities (Bamgbose, 2011). This disparity creates an urgent need for instructional strategies that can bridge linguistic gaps and support equitable language growth.

Storytelling, a long-standing oral tradition in African societies, has been recognised globally as a powerful pedagogical approach for enhancing young children's linguistic competence (Isbell *et al.*, 2004; Nicolopoulou, 2010). It provides a natural and culturally relevant medium through which children can acquire vocabulary, grasp narrative structures, and improve listening and speaking skills (Haven & Ducey, 2007). However, despite its potential, research indicates that storytelling is often underutilised in formal preschool classrooms in Nigeria due to factors such as inadequate teacher training, lack of structured integration into curricula, and the increasing preference for rote learning methods (Adeyemi, 2016; Okonkwo, 2018).

The rise of digital technologies and media-based learning in Lagos state has shifted children's engagement from oral storytelling to screen-based narratives (Lillard *et al.*, 2015). While digital tools may enhance visual literacy, they often reduce opportunities for interactive oral exchanges that foster deeper linguistic development. This raises critical questions about how traditional storytelling can be effectively adapted and sustained in modern preschool education.

Empirical studies on the impact of storytelling in Nigerian preschools remain limited, and most existing research focuses on general literacy practices rather than the specific role of storytelling in fostering vocabulary, comprehension, and expressive language (Ogunnaike, 2015; Okonkwo, 2018). There is insufficient evidence to guide educators, curriculum planners, and policymakers in harnessing storytelling as a structured pedagogical tool in Lagos State preschools.

Storytelling has been described as the art of using words, images, and gestures to communicate narratives that convey meaning, values, and cultural traditions (Haven & Ducey, 2007). In early childhood education, storytelling functions as both a pedagogical strategy and a developmental tool that stimulates imagination, creativity, and communication (Wright, 2010). Unlike story reading, which relies on written text, storytelling emphasises oral interaction and performance, making it a dynamic medium for promoting language skills in preschool contexts (Isbell *et al.*, 2004).

In African societies, storytelling occupies a central position in traditional education systems. Folktales, proverbs, and myths have historically been used to transmit cultural knowledge, morals, and linguistic skills (Adeyemi, 2016). This indigenous orientation situates storytelling as not only an instructional tool but also a cultural practice that connects children to their community heritage (Okonkwo, 2018). Storytelling in early childhood education refers to the deliberate use of oral narratives, dramatized tales, and story-based interactions as instructional strategies to promote language, cognitive, social, and cultural development (Haven & Ducey, 2007). Unlike passive story reading from a text, storytelling emphasises formative and dialogic elements, voice modulation, gestures, repetition, and improvisation that invite active participation from young listeners (Isbell *et al.*, 2004). This interactive quality makes storytelling particularly well suited to preschool settings where children learn through social engagement and multimodal experience.

Listening is a foundational component of language development, and storytelling provides an engaging platform for strengthening children's comprehension skills (Snow *et al.*, 1998). Through attentive listening to stories, children learn to follow sequences, interpret events, and derive meaning from oral discourse

(Nicolopoulou, 2010). Storytelling also promotes active listening behaviours such as predicting outcomes and asking clarifying questions, which are essential for academic success (Haven & Ducey, 2007).

Listening comprehension is a foundational skill in early language development: it underpins the ability to follow instructions, understand narratives, infer meaning, and later decode and comprehend written text (Snow *et al.*, 1998). Storytelling is an interactive, contextualised, and multimodal activity that creates an ideal context for strengthening preschoolers' listening comprehension by engaging attention, supplying meaningful discourse, and prompting higher-order processing such as prediction and inference (Isbell *et. al.*, 2004; Haven & Ducey, 2007).

Storytelling enhances listening comprehension through several interrelated mechanisms. First, stories provide coherent, temporally ordered input (setting → event → resolution) that helps children learn to track causal sequences and narrative structure (Nicolopoulou, 2010). Second, storytelling often includes repetition, rhythm, and formulaic language, which aid memory and facilitate the retrieval of story elements. Third, multimodal supports intonation, gesture, facial expression, props, and dramatisation supply nonverbal cues that make implicit meaning explicit and reduce cognitive load for young listeners (Wright, 2010). Finally, interactive features of effective storytelling (questioning, predicting, clarifying) actively engage children in meaning-making rather than passive reception, promoting comprehension processes such as inferencing and summarising (Isbell *et al.*, 2004; Haven & Ducey, 2007).

Experimental and classroom studies show that participatory storytelling (teacher-led oral narration with interactive elaboration) improves children's ability to recall story events, answer literal and inferential questions, and produce coherent retells compared with non-interactive exposure to stories or isolated vocabulary instruction (Isbell *et al.*, 2004; Jalongo, 2014). Repeated storytelling sessions strengthen comprehension gains by allowing children to consolidate mental models of the narrative and to practise higher-level listening skills (Snow *et al.*, 1998). Although much of the rigorous intervention literature stems from Western contexts, the underlying cognitive and social mechanisms apply across cultural settings and are supported by research on oral narrative traditions in Africa (Ogunnaike, 2015; Adeyemi, 2016).

Storytelling does not only develop receptive skills but also expressive language abilities. When children retell stories, dramatise narratives, or create their own tales, they practice fluency, sentence formation, and communicative competence (Wright, 2010). Studies have shown that children who participate in storytelling activities display greater confidence in oral expression compared to peers exposed primarily to rote learning methods (Isbell *et al.*, 2004; Okonkwo, 2018).

Storytelling is a potent catalyst for developing preschoolers' expressive language and broader communicative competencies. Beyond receptive outcomes such as vocabulary and comprehension, storytelling actively cultivates the skills children need to produce extended discourse, negotiate meaning with others, and adapt language to different social contexts (Isbell *et. al.*, 2004; Wright, 2010). Studies comparing interactive storytelling interventions with less dialogic approaches report gains in measures of expressive language, including increased mean length of utterance (MLU), greater variety of sentence types, and more coherent narrative retells (Isbell *et. al.*, 2004; Jalongo, 2014). Classroom-based observations further show that children engaged in drama, puppet play, and group retell activities use more descriptive language and complex sentence constructions during free play and structured tasks than peers who experience primarily teacher-centered instruction (Wright, 2010).

Storytelling contributes to the development of narrative competence, which is essential for literacy acquisition. Narratives provide structural models that help children understand story elements, such as setting, characters, conflict, and resolution (Miller & Pennycuff, 2008). These structures prepare preschoolers for later reading and writing tasks by enhancing their ability to organise thoughts coherently and construct sentences (Snow *et. al.*, 1998).

Narrative skills is the ability to construct, comprehend, and retell coherent stories, are central to early literacy because they organise experience into meaningfully sequenced discourse and provide a bridge between oral language and written text (Snow *et al.*, 1998). In preschool children, well-developed narrative competence predicts later reading comprehension, spelling, and written composition because narratives require supra-sentential organisation (macrostructure) as well as lexical and syntactic precision (microstructure) capacities

that underpin conventional literacy (Miller & Pennycuff, 2008; Nicolopoulou, 2010).

Research shows that storytelling significantly enhances children's vocabulary growth by exposing them to both familiar and unfamiliar words within meaningful contexts (Jalongo, 2014). Oral narratives provide opportunities for word repetition, contextual cues, and semantic associations that enrich children's lexical repertoire (Isbell *et. al.*, 2004). For preschoolers in multilingual environments like Lagos, where English often functions as a second language, storytelling can facilitate smoother vocabulary acquisition by bridging indigenous languages and English (Bamgbose, 2011; Ogunnaike, 2015).

Storytelling is a powerful vehicle for vocabulary development in early childhood because it presents words in rich, meaningful contexts rather than as isolated items (Jalongo, 2014). Unlike decontextualised word lists, narratives embed new lexical items within plots, character actions, and situational cues, which help children infer meanings, form semantic networks, and retain words through repeated exposure and varied usage (Isbell *et. al.*, 2004; Miller & Pennycuff, 2008).

Empirical studies in diverse contexts have found that regular storytelling activities increase both receptive and expressive vocabulary in preschool children compared with instruction that lacks narrative context (Isbell *et. al.*, 2004; Jalongo, 2014). Practically, this suggests that teachers who intentionally select stories with target vocabulary, pause to explicate meanings, invite children to dramatise scenes, and encourage retelling will produce stronger vocabulary gains than those who rely solely on direct instruction or rote memorisation.

Lagos's linguistic diversity makes storytelling particularly valuable: indigenous folktales and proverbs are culturally resonant vehicles for introducing academic vocabulary while validating home language knowledge (Adeyemi, 2016). Teachers can leverage culturally familiar narratives to scaffold English vocabulary, using code-switching strategically to make semantic links transparent (Ogunnaike, 2015). However, realising these benefits requires teacher training in interactive storytelling techniques and curriculum time allocated for narrative-rich activities rather than exclusively teacher-centred lessons (Okonkwo, 2018).

Therefore, this study seeks to address the underexplored role of storytelling in language development among preschool children in Lagos State. Without rigorous inquiry into how storytelling practices influence children's oral expression, comprehension, and vocabulary acquisition, Nigerian preschool education risks neglecting a culturally embedded and pedagogically sound method of enhancing early language skills.

This study seeks to examine the role of storytelling in language development among preschool children in Lagos State. By investigating the extent to which storytelling enhances vocabulary, sentence formation, comprehension, and oral expression, the study aims to provide empirical evidence that will strengthen the use of culturally relevant and pedagogically sound practices in Nigerian preschools.

### **Objectives of the study**

The specific objectives of the study are to:

- i. Determine the extent to which storytelling influences the vocabulary development of preschoolers in Lagos State.
- ii. Examine the effect of storytelling on the listening and comprehension skills of preschool children in Lagos State.
- iii. Assess the role of storytelling in improving the speaking and expressive language abilities of preschoolers in Lagos State.
- iv. Investigate the influence of storytelling on the narrative and sentence construction skills of preschool children in Lagos State.

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the effect of storytelling on vocabulary acquisition among preschoolers in Lagos State?
2. What is the effect of storytelling on listening comprehension among preschoolers?
3. How does storytelling influence oral expression and communication among preschoolers?
4. What is the effect of storytelling on narrative skills and literacy foundations of preschoolers?



## Hypothesis

**H0:** There is no significant difference in the post-test mean scores of the experimental and control groups across all language development variables

## Methodology

This study employs a quasi-experimental research design, specifically the pre-test, post-test control group design. This design is chosen because it allows the researcher to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between the use of storytelling as an instructional strategy and the language development of preschool children. The population of this study consists of all preschool children aged 3–5 years enrolled in public and private nursery schools across Lagos State. A sample of 120 preschoolers was selected for the study using a multistage sampling technique, which involved stratifying schools into public and private categories to ensure a diverse representation of socio-economic backgrounds. Schools were stratified into public and private categories to ensure representation from different socio-economic backgrounds. From the selected schools, children were randomly assigned to two groups: the experimental group and the control group. A total of six schools across three local government areas in Lagos were selected. From each school, 20 pupils (10 for experimental and 10 for control) were sampled, for a total of 120 children. Two research instruments were used for the study: “Language Development Assessment Checklist” (LDAC) and Teacher's Rating Scale (TRS), for teachers to evaluate the oral communication and vocabulary growth of pupils before and after the intervention. Reliability was established using the Cronbach Alpha technique, with a reliability coefficient of 0.76. Data collected was **descriptive and inferential statistics** of Paired Sample t-test and independent t-test at a 0.05 level of significance.

## Result

**Research Question 1: What is the effect of storytelling on vocabulary acquisition among preschoolers in Lagos State?**

*Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of Vocabulary Acquisition*

Group	N	Pre-Test Mean (SD)	Post-Test Mean (SD)	Mean Difference
<b>Experimental</b>	60	24.35 (3.41)	37.82 (4.20)	+13.47
<b>Control</b>	60	23.91 (3.55)	26.43 (3.68)	+2.52

Table 1 shows that preschoolers in the experimental group had a substantial improvement in vocabulary acquisition after exposure to storytelling (Mean Difference = +13.47), compared to the control group (Mean Difference = +2.52). This improvement is statistically significant, indicating that storytelling is an effective method for enhancing vocabulary acquisition in preschool children. This suggests that storytelling significantly enhanced children's vocabulary growth.

**Research Question 2: What is the effect of storytelling on listening comprehension among preschoolers?**

*Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of Listening Comprehension*

Group	N	Pre-Test Mean (SD)	Post-Test Mean (SD)	Mean Difference
<b>Experimental</b>	60	21.14 (2.95)	35.60 (3.77)	+14.46
<b>Control</b>	60	20.85 (3.02)	24.30 (3.18)	+3.45

Table 2 results reveal that the experimental group's listening comprehension improved by +14.46 points, while the control group improved by only +3.45 points. This indicates that storytelling fosters attentive listening and comprehension skills among preschoolers more effectively than conventional teaching methods.

**Research Question 3:** How does storytelling influence oral expression and communication among preschoolers?

**Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of Oral Expression**

Group	N	Pre-Test Mean (SD)	Post-Test Mean (SD)	Mean Difference
<b>Experimental</b>	60	22.78 (3.12)	36.41 (4.05)	+13.63
<b>Control</b>	60	22.35 (3.25)	25.21 (3.43)	+2.86

Table 3 above shows that the experimental group recorded a significant gain in oral expression and communication skills after storytelling activities (Mean Difference= +13.63), while the control group showed minimal improvement (Mean Difference= +2.86). This finding suggests that storytelling provides children with opportunities to practice verbal expression, improve pronunciation, and construct meaningful sentences.

**Research Question 4:** What is the effect of storytelling on narrative skills and literacy foundations of preschoolers?

**Table 4: Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of Narrative Skills**

Group	N	Pre-Test Mean (SD)	Post-Test Mean (SD)	Mean Difference
<b>Experimental</b>	60	20.95 (2.88)	34.77 (3.95)	+13.82
<b>Control</b>	60	21.05 (2.96)	23.89 (3.20)	+2.84

Table 4 indicates that preschoolers exposed to storytelling demonstrated a remarkable improvement in narrative skills (+13.82), compared to the control group (+2.84). This demonstrates that storytelling serves as a foundation for literacy by enabling children to structure ideas, sequence events, and retell stories effectively.

### Testing Hypothesis

$H_0$ : There is no significant difference in the post-test mean scores of the experimental and control groups across all language development variables

**Table 5: Independent Samples t-test of Post-Test Scores Between Groups**

Variable	t-value	df	p-value (Sig.)	Decision at 0.05
<b>Vocabulary Acquisition</b>	11.24	118	0.000	Reject $H_0$
<b>Listening Comprehension</b>	12.02	118	0.000	Reject $H_0$
<b>Oral Expression</b>	10.88	118	0.000	Reject $H_0$
<b>Narrative Skills</b>	11.57	118	0.000	Reject $H_0$

The results in table 5 show that there is a statistically significant difference in the post-test mean scores of the experimental and control groups across all language development variables ( $p < 0.05$ ). Hence, the null hypotheses are rejected. This implies that storytelling has a significant positive effect on vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension, oral expression, and narrative skills among preschoolers in Lagos State.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The findings of this study revealed that preschoolers in the experimental group who were exposed to storytelling activities showed significant improvement in vocabulary acquisition compared to their peers in the control group. This supports the argument that storytelling serves as a rich medium for introducing children to new words, phrases, and expressions within meaningful contexts.

This outcome is consistent with the work of Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, and Lowrance (2004), who found that storytelling significantly enhances children's vocabulary development because words are presented in narrative contexts that make them easier to understand and remember. However, future research could explore how storytelling methods can be adapted to diverse linguistic backgrounds in Lagos State. Similarly, Wright (2010) notes that repeated exposure to stories provides young learners with opportunities to encounter and internalise new vocabulary. By listening to stories and later retelling them, preschoolers expand their lexical repertoire and apply these words in their everyday communication.

The study also found that storytelling had a strong positive effect on children's listening comprehension skills. Children in the experimental group demonstrated significantly higher post-test scores than those in the control group. This suggests that storytelling activities encourage children to focus, pay attention to details, and process spoken information more effectively.

This finding resonates with Berkowitz (2011), who emphasised that storytelling develops auditory discrimination and comprehension as children learn to identify main ideas, recall details, and make inferences from the stories they hear. In addition, Haven and Ducey (2007) argued that storytelling fosters active listening because it engages children's imagination and requires them to follow a sequence of events.

The results showed that preschoolers exposed to storytelling demonstrated greater improvement in oral expression and communication skills compared to those in the control group. This suggests that storytelling provides children with opportunities to practice speaking, articulate thoughts clearly, and engage in verbal interactions.

This finding is consistent with Ellis and Brewster (2014), who observed that storytelling encourages children to retell stories, role-play characters, and respond to questions, thereby strengthening their speaking abilities. Similarly, Nguyen (2013) reported that children engaged in storytelling developed better sentence structure, pronunciation, and expressive skills than those who only participated in rote learning or drill-based lessons.

The study found that narrative skills improved significantly among children exposed to storytelling. Participants in the experimental group demonstrated greater ability to retell stories, organise events sequentially, and construct coherent narratives than their peers in the control group. This highlights storytelling as a critical tool for developing early literacy foundations.

This finding agrees with Paris and Paris (2003), who found that storytelling supports the development of narrative competence, which is closely linked to later reading and writing proficiency. In addition, Nicolopoulou (2002) emphasised that storytelling allows children to internalise narrative structures, including plot, setting, and characters, which contribute to literacy development.

The improvement in narrative skills observed in this study also aligns with the work of Miller and Pennycuff (2008), who argued that storytelling fosters children's ability to create and share personal stories, thereby strengthening their identity as emerging readers and writers. This supports the notion that storytelling is not only an oral activity but also a preparatory stage for formal literacy development.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the findings, the study concludes that storytelling is an effective pedagogical tool for enhancing language development among preschoolers in Lagos State. Unlike conventional teaching approaches, storytelling provides a meaningful, interactive, and engaging learning experience that stimulates vocabulary

growth, strengthens listening comprehension, fosters oral expression, and builds narrative competence. The results align with socio-cultural and constructivist learning theories, which emphasise that children acquire language best through social interaction, cultural mediation, and active participation in meaningful contexts. These findings suggest the need for a curriculum that integrates storytelling as a core instructional strategy to enhance language development in preschool classrooms. Storytelling, therefore, not only enriches linguistic skills but also prepares preschoolers for future literacy and academic success.

## Recommendations

In light of the conclusion, the following recommendations are made:

1. Preschool teachers should integrate storytelling into daily classroom activities as a core instructional strategy.
2. Storytelling should be incorporated into the Early Childhood Education curriculum as a structured component for developing language skills.
3. Parents should be encouraged to tell or read stories to their children at home to reinforce language skills learned at school.
4. The Lagos State Ministry of Education should provide capacity-building programs for teachers on innovative language development strategies, with special emphasis on storytelling.

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