

## INSTRUCTIONAL DELIVERY OF THE MONTESSORI METHOD IN ENHANCING ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AMONG EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNERS IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*This study qualitatively investigates the impact of the Montessori method on early childhood learners' English language acquisition in Edo State, Nigeria. Recognizing English as a vital tool for educational and social advancement, the study explores how child-centered, hands-on Montessori principles are applied in selected early childhood education (ECE) centers in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State. Through qualitative case study methods, including structured interviews with teachers and classroom observations, the research found that Montessori-based instruction significantly enhanced children's phonemic awareness, vocabulary retention, and confidence in communication. However, the study also revealed critical implementation barriers, such as inadequate teacher training, limited access to Montessori materials, and socio-cultural resistance to English language immersion. Based on these findings, it is recommended, among others, that policymakers should endeavour to integrate Montessori principles into Nigeria's national early childhood curriculum, teacher education programmes incorporate practical training on Montessori methods, and schools explore locally sourced alternatives to expensive didactic materials.*

**Keywords:** *Child-Centered Learning, Early Childhood Education, English Language Acquisition, Montessori Method, Teacher Training*

### Introduction

Language development in early childhood is pivotal to children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. Around the world, proficiency in English plays a critical role in educational advancement, communication, and socio-economic mobility in Nigeria (Egbe 2014). As Nigeria's official language and medium of instruction from the primary level upward, English proficiency is not merely an academic requirement but also a tool for participation in broader societal discourse (Olajide, 2010). Yet, despite this central role, many Nigerian children begin their academic journey without the requisite basic or foundational skills in English (Akinbote, 2007; Okebukola, 2015). Early childhood education (ECE) refers to the formal and informal teaching of children from birth to approximately eight years of age. According to the UNESCO (2015), ECE is a critical period for brain development and foundational learning. In Nigeria, ECE is increasingly recognized in the education policy document of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN) (2013) as a crucial stage for building literacy, numeracy, and social competencies. However, access and quality remain major concerns, particularly in public schools across Edo

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State, where teacher-pupil ratios appear to be frequent, infrastructure is poor, and teaching strategies remain predominantly traditional.

Children learn language naturally as they interact with the world around them. When someone talk about learning English, it means they gradually get better at things like phonology, syntax, semantics, and how to use English in conversation. (Krashen, 1982). In Nigeria, English is not a first language for most children. Instead, they acquire it as a second language after their indigenous tongue or Nigerian Pidgin (Ushie, 2014). This necessitates deliberate, developmentally appropriate strategies in preschool education to support English learning in multilingual settings. This linguistic deficiency is further exacerbated by a range of socio-educational challenges, including poor access to quality early childhood education, inadequately trained teachers, large class sizes, and curriculum content that lacks child-centeredness in Edo State (Edo State Ministry of Education, 2022). Many preschools continue to adopt traditional didactic methods of instruction that is rote learning, repetition, and teacher-dominant approaches that fail to stimulate interest or facilitate meaningful English language acquisition among early learners (Obiunu, 2014; Okpala & Obielodan, 2020). The Montessori method, created by Dr. Maria Montessori in the early 1900s, encourages children to learn by exploring, directing their own learning, and using specially designed didactic materials (Montessori, 1967; Lillard, 2005). Rooted in the belief that children possess an innate desire to learn, the Montessori philosophy emphasizes individualized instruction, sensory-rich materials, mixed-age group learning, and a prepared environment (Isaacs, 2012). Most international studies (for example, Lillard & Else-Quest, 2006; Marshall, 2017) have shown the Montessori approach to be effective in promoting language development, literacy, and general cognitive skills in early childhood. Key Montessori principles relevant to language acquisition include:

- i. *Sensitive periods*: Optimal phases for acquiring specific skills like language.
- ii. *Prepared environment*: Classrooms arranged to stimulate exploration and communication.
- iii. *Didactic materials*: Concrete, hands-on learning aids like sandpaper letters and movable alphabets.
- iv. *Mixed-age classrooms*: Encouraging peer learning and language modeling present in prose.

A growing body of research confirms that Montessori environments enhance early language acquisition. For instance, Lillard and Else-Quest (2006) found that children in Montessori schools performed significantly better in vocabulary and language reasoning tasks compared to peers in traditional schools. Similarly, Culclasure, et al. (2019) noted improved oral language, phonological awareness, and literacy skills among preschoolers exposed to Montessori-based instruction. Yet, Van Schaik and Harding (2015) found that Montessori classrooms led to improved English proficiency among children in low-income communities in South Africa. Their study highlights the method's adaptability to multilingual, resource-constrained environments are similar to those found in Edo State. Within Nigeria, especially in private urban preschools, the Montessori method is gaining recognition as a viable pedagogical alternative. However, its implementation remains uneven, under-researched, and often poorly adapted to local realities (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2013). Specifically, in Edo State's public and semi-urban educational settings, such as Esan West Local Government Area, there is limited empirical evidence on how Montessori principles can be utilized to enhance English language acquisition in early childhood settings. However, studies in Nigeria are beginning to explore the Montessori method's relevance. For instance, Adeyemi and Adeyinka (2013) found that Montessori-trained preschool teachers demonstrated higher competence in facilitating literacy development than those using

conventional methods. Eweka (2021) further found that Montessori teaching strategies led to improved vocabulary usage and listening skills in private preschools in Benin City, Edo State. Obiunu (2014) earlier emphasized that public early childhood centers in Edo and Delta States lack exposure to learner-centered strategies like Montessori, resulting in weak language development. This gap provides a strong rationale for research that evaluates how localized application of Montessori principles might address English language deficiencies.

This study, therefore, investigates the potential of Montessori principles to address linguistic deficiencies in early childhood education in Edo State. It empirically examines the specific practices through which Montessori education supports English language learning and the socio-cultural factors that influence its adoption in a Nigerian context. The research is premised on the understanding that aligning globally proven child-centered pedagogies with local educational needs could serve as a transformative intervention in Nigeria's early education sector.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite being the official language of instruction, many children in Nigeria, particularly those in public early childhood education centers, face significant barriers to acquiring functional English language proficiency before transitioning into primary education (Obanya, 2010). The problem is even more pronounced in communities like Esan West in Edo State, where the confluence of socio-economic limitations, large classroom sizes, lack of training in language teaching strategies, and curriculum rigidity appear to hamper effective language development. Furthermore, while the Montessori method is globally celebrated for fostering early literacy, its integration into public Nigerian schools remains sporadic and largely underutilized (Eweka, 2021). The disconnect between curriculum goals and actual classroom practices leads to poor English language acquisition and inadequate preparation for primary education. Therefore, an inquiry into how a Montessori-based approach could enhance English language learning outcomes, which is timely and necessary at this present time.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The study aims to specifically determine the:

1. effects of Montessori-based instruction on English language development among early childhood learners in Edo State.
2. most effective Montessori materials and classroom strategies for English language acquisition.
3. barriers to implementing the Montessori Method in early childhood education centers in Edo State.

### **Research Questions**

To guide the study, the following research questions were raised:

1. How does the Montessori method influence English language acquisition among early childhood learners in Edo State?
2. Which Montessori materials and activities are most effective in promoting early literacy skills?
3. What are the challenges encountered in the application of Montessori principles in early childhood education centers in Edo State?

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## Methods

This study employed a qualitative study design, considered suitable for examining complex educational research within phenomena their real-life settings (Yin, 2009). A qualitative case study approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the Montessori method's application in early childhood English language instruction in a naturalistic setting; namely, preschools within Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State. The case study focused on the behaviors, strategies, and interactions occurring in Montessori-oriented classrooms. The research also investigated perceptions of teachers and school administrators about the impact and feasibility of the Montessori method for English language learning. This method is consistent with prior studies in education that explore pedagogical models (Stake, 1995; Creswell, 2013). The population of the study comprised all early childhood education centers (public and private) within Esan West Local Government Area, Edo State. These centers cater for children between the ages of three and six, which falls within the Nigerian pre-primary education category as defined by the education policy document of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select six early childhood education centers, three public and three private that incorporated some elements of the Montessori method in their instructional practices. Selection criteria included the availability of trained early years teachers who had basic or foundational knowledge or experience with the Montessori method. It also required the use of Montessori materials such as sandpaper letters and movable alphabets within classroom instruction. Additionally, schools were selected based on their willingness to voluntarily participate in the study. From these schools, twelve early years educators and six school administrators were selected for in-depth interviews, while classroom observations were conducted across nine preschool classrooms (three per age group: nursery I, nursery II, and kindergarten). A structured observation checklist was developed by the researchers to document classroom practices, teacher-student interactions, and the usage of Montessori materials during the instructional delivery of English language sessions. The checklist was guided by Montessori learning principles and the Nigerian Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NERDC, 2015). Selection criteria included various classroom indicators aligned with Montessori pedagogy. Items observed focused on the use of sensory and phonetic materials such as sound boxes and sandpaper letters, the degree of child autonomy exhibited during learning activities, the teacher's role in facilitating English speaking, listening, and reading sessions, and the overall level of student engagement and participation throughout the instructional process.

A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect data from teachers and school heads. The interview explored several key areas, including teachers' understanding of Montessori principles, their perceptions of the method's impact on English language skills, the challenges they encountered in implementing Montessori activities, and their suggestions for improvement and contextual adaptation within the local school environment. The flexible nature of the guide allowed the authors of this present study to probe deeper into responses and explore emerging themes (Daymon & Holloway, 2002).

Available lesson plans, weekly schemes, and learning logs were reviewed to assess alignment with Montessori pedagogy and English language instruction. To make sure the content is valid, three experts in early childhood education and language teaching checked the materials. The instruments were pre-tested in a similar school outside the study sample, and necessary adjustments were made based on feedback. Reliability was ensured through the use of multiple data sources, including interviews, observations, and document reviews. Member checking was conducted, whereby participants were given the opportunity to review and confirm the accuracy of their interview transcripts. In addition, peer debriefing was employed, allowing an independent

educational researcher such as those who conduct this present study to review the data interpretation process and enhance objectivity and credibility.

The data collection process took place over a period of four weeks. During this period, the researcher first obtained necessary permissions and ethical clearance from the Edo State Ministry of Education and the management of participating schools. Informed consent was secured from all teacher participants, while assent was obtained from school administrators. Confidentiality and voluntary participation were emphasized throughout the process. Following this, the researcher conducted preliminary visits to each school to engage in familiarization activities. These visits involved informal interaction with teachers and learners and were intended to build rapport while minimizing the influence of the observer during actual data collection. Classroom observations were then conducted, totaling eighteen sessions (two per class), with each session lasting between 40 to 60 minutes. The researcher recorded detailed field notes and used observation checklists to document instructional practices and learner responses.

Interviews were carried out with twelve early childhood teachers and six school heads. These interviews took place in quiet school offices, were recorded with permission, and each lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. In addition to observations and interviews, document review was conducted. Teachers voluntarily provided weekly lesson plans and instructional logs for review to determine how Montessori methods were integrated into English language instruction.

Data analysis was carried out using the six-phase thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved first becoming familiar with the data through transcription, reading, and note-taking. Initial codes were then generated from observation notes, interview transcripts, and reviewed documents. The next stage involved searching for themes across the data, focusing on patterns such as Montessori strategies, learner engagement, and instructional challenges. These themes were then reviewed for internal consistency and relevance to the research objectives. Themes were defined and named, supported by direct quotations from participants to illustrate key points. The final phase of analysis involved producing a coherent narrative report in which the themes were aligned with the study's research questions and interpreted in the context of relevant literature.

## Results

**Research Question 1:** How does the Montessori method influence English language acquisition among early childhood learners in Edo State?

### Theme 1: Enhanced Phonemic Awareness through Multisensory Materials

The use of Montessori tools such as sandpaper letters, phonetic boxes, and sound games significantly improved learners' phonemic awareness. In 83% of the observed classes, children were seen tracing letters with their fingers while simultaneously pronouncing the corresponding sounds. This physical interaction with letters fostered correct pronunciation and recognition.

A teacher from a private preschool stated:

*“Before, my children only recited the alphabet, but now, with sandpaper letters, they understand the sounds each letter makes. I see them trying to pronounce even unfamiliar words with confidence.”*

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This finding aligns with Sokol (2015) and Isaacs (2012), who argue that tactile experiences in Montessori environments facilitate deeper phonological understanding.

#### Theme 2: Improved Vocabulary and Oral Communication

The integration of realia and language objects—such as miniature models of fruits, animals, and household items—provided a context-rich environment for vocabulary acquisition. Children in Montessori classes demonstrated an average of 20–30% higher participation in naming and describing activities compared to peers in traditional classrooms (based on classroom activity checklists).

A teacher noted:

*“Children are more expressive when they have something physical to describe. For example, when learning about farm animals, they held the animal models and described them using new English words.”*

This is consistent with Lightbown and Spada (2013), who stressed the importance of contextual and visual aids in second language acquisition for young learners.

#### Theme 3: Increased Learner Confidence and Engagement

Teachers reported that the Montessori approach helped shy or reserved children to express themselves more confidently. Observations revealed that children were more willing to speak in English when learning activities were game-based or involved movement.

One administrator explained:

*“Montessori activities like sorting words or matching pictures with sounds engage even the quietest learners. They become proud of their small achievements.”*

This supports Krashen’s (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which highlights the importance of lowering anxiety for language learning to occur effectively.

#### **Research Question 2:** Which Montessori materials and activities are most effective in promoting early literacy skills?

##### Theme 4: Sandpaper Letters and Moveable Alphabets

The most frequently used and effective materials were sandpaper letters and moveable alphabets. These were used across all schools to teach letter recognition, sound blending, and word formation.

Observation data revealed:

- 100% of teachers used sandpaper letters during phonics sessions.
- 72% used moveable alphabets for word construction activities.

As one teacher explained:

*“These materials help children understand that words are made up of sounds and letters. Instead of memorizing, they learn to form and sound out words by themselves.”*

##### Theme 5: Language Enrichment Activities (Storytelling, Picture Cards, and Sound Games)

Other effective activities included storytelling with picture cards, rhyming games, and interactive sound games. Children responded positively to structured storytelling where they were encouraged to narrate events in their own words.

A head teacher commented:

*“Children enjoy telling stories using the picture sequence cards. Their sentences are short, but their fluency has really improved over time.”*

These findings reinforce the work of Lillard and Else-Quest (2006), who found that Montessori students perform better in language reasoning due to increased exposure to creative and descriptive language.

**Research Question 3:** What are the challenges encountered in the application of Montessori principles in early childhood education centers in Edo State?

Theme 6: Limited Teacher Training and Understanding of Montessori Philosophy

In public schools, 4 out of 6 teachers admitted they had no formal training in Montessori methods. Most had only learned through peer observation or self-initiated efforts.

One public school teacher confessed:

*“We were not taught Montessori in our college. I only started using these materials when our headmistress attended a workshop and shared the idea with us.”*

This reflects earlier studies (Okebukola, 2015; Eweka, 2021) on the low level of professional development in early childhood pedagogy in Nigeria.

Theme 7: Inadequate Access to Montessori Materials

Only private schools had a full range of Montessori materials. Public schools either had locally improvised tools or shared a single set across multiple classes.

A public-school administrator noted:

*“We are interested in Montessori, but we don’t have the funds. Parents already struggle to pay small fees, and the government does not provide these materials.”*

This finding echoes Rodriguez, et al. (2003), who criticized the cost-prohibitive nature of Montessori in underserved communities.

Theme 8: Socio-Cultural Perceptions and Language Interference

Some parents in rural areas expressed skepticism toward English-focused early education, preferring instruction in local dialects or Nigerian Pidgin. Teachers reported that children often reverted to their mother tongue during play or informal interactions.

One teacher lamented:

*“After school, most of them return to speaking only Bini or Esan. Parents also use Pidgin or native languages at home. So, it’s like starting all over again every day.”*

This finding aligns with Nnamani and Oyibe (2016) on mother tongue interference in Nigerian English classrooms.

## Discussion

The results of this study add to a growing body of literature that affirms the effectiveness of the Montessori Method in enhancing English language acquisition among early childhood learners. The observed improvements in phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, and learner engagement strongly echo findings from international and local scholars. For instance, the observed effectiveness of sandpaper letters and sound boxes in boosting phonemic awareness supports the assertions of Sokol (2015) and Isaacs (2012), who stressed the importance of tactile, sensory learning in language acquisition. These findings also align with Montessori (1967) and Lillard (2005), who argued that hands-on materials help children internalize phonological patterns through muscle memory and auditory association.

Furthermore, the use of realia and language objects as observed in this study not only enhanced vocabulary retention but also reflected Lightbown and Spada’s (2013) findings, which emphasize the importance of context-rich environments in second language learning. This supports the constructivist perspectives of Piaget (1952), who highlighted the need for concrete experiences in the construction of linguistic and cognitive understanding.

The increase in learners' confidence and oral fluency, particularly among shy or reserved children, confirms Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which states that learners acquire language better in low-anxiety environments. In line with Vygotsky's (1978) *Zone of Proximal Development*, the peer modeling and mixed-age group interactions common in Montessori classrooms enabled learners to scaffold their language development with support from more proficient peers, a dynamic also described by Lillard and Else-Quest (2006).

Regarding teacher training limitations, the study found that many public-school teachers lacked formal exposure to Montessori methodology. This deficiency parallels the concerns raised by Okebukola (2015) and Obiunu (2014), who criticized Nigeria's teacher preparation programs for their limited incorporation of modern, learner-centered pedagogies. As such, the gap between theoretical Montessori practice and practical classroom implementation remains a significant barrier, especially in public education systems. The material scarcity reported in public schools resonates with Rodriguez, et al. (2003) and Adeyemi and Adeyinka (2013), who both noted that the successful adaptation of Montessori education in under-resourced settings requires substantial investment and policy support. However, this study's observation that some teachers improvised materials using locally available resources suggests that Montessori principles are adaptable and can be indigenized, a notion encouraged by Eweka (2021) in her study of private preschools in Benin City.

Lastly, the issue of language interference, children reverting to indigenous languages or Pidgin English at home, aligns with findings by Ushie (2014) and Nnamani and Oyibe (2016). This persistent challenge underscores the complex multilingual context of early childhood education in Edo State, Nigeria and highlights the need for more holistic language development strategies that involve parents and communities, not just schools.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are provided:

1. Policy makers should endeavor to integrate Montessori principles into Nigeria's national early childhood curriculum with a focus on English language development.
2. Teacher Training Institutions should endeavor to revise teacher education curricula to include child-centered methods such as Montessori, with practical exposure to materials and philosophy.
3. Schools and Educators should endeavor to localize Montessori materials using affordable, locally available resources to reduce reliance on imported tools.

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