

## Correlation among Mother Tongue, Socio-Economic Status and Academic Performance of Social Studies Students

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship among mother tongue (Urhobo language), socio-economic status, and the academic performance of social studies students in upper basic schools in Delta State. The study focused on one independent variable, mother tongue (Urhobo language instruction), while academic performance was the dependent variable, and socioeconomic status was adopted as a moderating variable. A quasi-experimental pre-test post-test control group design was the research design. The population comprised 80,912 Upper Basic 8 Social Studies students in Delta State during the 2023/2024 academic session. A sample of 100 students was selected using multistage, purposive, and random sampling techniques. One school was used as the experimental group, receiving instructions in the Urhobo language, while the control group was taught in the English language. Data was collected using a Social Studies Mother Tongue Test (SSMTT), which had a reliability coefficient of 0.89. Research questions were answered using descriptive statistics, while hypotheses were tested using a t-test at a 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that students taught social studies with their mother tongue performed significantly better than those taught with English, demonstrating that mother-tongue instruction enhances comprehension, retention, and engagement. Additionally, socio-economic status did not moderate the relationship between mother tongue and academic performance of students, suggesting that language familiarity is more influential than financial status. The study recommended policy initiatives, promoting indigenous language instruction, and increased parental support for mother-tongue learning. These findings contribute to educational research by reinforcing the cognitive advantages of using mother tongue for teaching and its potential for improving learning outcomes across socioeconomic groups.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education plays a crucial role in human development as it sharpens individuals and societies (Attahakul, 2025). Therefore, in Nigeria, the language of instruction in the process of education may significantly impact students' academic performance and

educational outcomes. Academic performance is a complex measure that reflects students' ability to grasp, retain, and apply knowledge acquired during lessons in different school subjects (Thomas et al., 2024; Filippi et al., 2025). In Nigeria, education is considered a priority by the government, as it is seen as a solution to ignorance and a means of nurturing an enlightened, dynamic, resourceful, and productive citizenry. Social studies, on the other hand, is seen as a critical subject considered to aid the achievement of educational goals in Nigeria. Looking at the Nigeria educational system, Social Studies is made mandatory for all lower, middle, and upper basic students. It continues in the form of civics education and government at the senior secondary school level (Atubi, 2024).

Social studies is the study of how man interacts with his environments; these environments include social, physical, political, economic, or cultural. It also explores how the environment influences man in return. Social studies touches on all aspects of human life and plays a vital role in individual and national growth/development (Atubi, 2023). Social studies helps make students obedient citizens and self-reliant by bringing peace, tranquility, unity, love, kindness, survival, and development to Nigerian society.

The performance of students in social studies plays a crucial role in shaping the socio-economic development of our country (Atubi, 2021). By examining students' academic achievements, we can gauge their comprehension of social studies concepts. Despite the Universal Basic Education (UBE) program's mandate for comprehensive social studies education within the Nigerian school system, the subject has not fully achieved its goals (Adeyemi, 2019). Indicators such as gender-specific grades and test scores reveal a concerning trend: students' grasp of the material has been inadequate. The challenges extend beyond academic performance, as students struggle to meet the standards expected in a subject so integral to understanding societal dynamics. Additionally, language proficiency, including the language of instruction, has not been effectively linked to academic success. This oversight neglects Akol's (2024) argument that instruction in students' native languages (mother tongue) can enhance their understanding and mastery of the subject matter.

"Mother tongue" refers to the indigenous language of learners or that of their parents. Mother tongue instruction departs from the traditional practice of using the English language as the primary medium of instruction in many Nigerian schools, including those in Delta State. This approach seeks to preserve and promote indigenous languages and cultures while recognizing the importance of linguistic diversity and cultural heritage (Ramonienè & Ramonaitè, 2024). Supporters of mother tongue instruction argue that it can deepen students' understanding of subject matter when taught in their native language (Lo, 2019), potentially enhancing academic performance. Moreover, using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction can improve students' communication skills (Choudhary & Durrani, 2020). Teaching in a familiar language encourages active participation in classroom discussions and enables students to express their thoughts and ideas effectively (Cohen & Henry, 2019). Instruction in one's mother tongue yields cognitive benefits, fostering improved critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and overall cognitive development (Sakaryalı et al., 2024). Crucially, mother

tongue instruction will address educational disparities by ensuring that students who speak indigenous languages at home do not face any form of learning disadvantage in schools. This potential contribution to educational equity underscores the importance of using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction.

According to [Adegbite and Akindele \(2021\)](#), language serves as the primary vehicle for instruction and knowledge acquisition, making it a crucial factor in students' academic performance. The Urhobo language, as one of the indigenous languages in Delta State, is an important factor that influences students' cognitive development and comprehension abilities, particularly in social studies. Research suggests that when students receive instruction in their mother tongue, they tend to grasp abstract concepts more effectively and demonstrate improved retention of subject matter ([Oyetade, 2022](#); [Williams, 2023](#); [Sumartana et al., 2025](#); [Velasco, 2025](#)).

In the context of social studies, which involves an understanding of societal structures, cultural heritage, and civic responsibilities, linguistic familiarity enhances students' engagement and participation. According to [Eshiet and Okon \(2023\)](#), students who learn through a language they are comfortable with tend to develop stronger analytical skills, as they can relate classroom knowledge to real-life experiences. The Urhobo language, being the first language for many students in Delta State, provides a cognitive scaffold that supports their ability to analyze historical events, governance systems, and social interactions. Furthermore, studies indicate that linguistic interference can occur when there is a mismatch between the language of instruction and students' mother tongue. [Uchenna and Bello \(2020\)](#) and [Oyetunde \(2015\)](#) found that students who struggle with language comprehension often have difficulties following classroom discussions, completing assignments, and performing well in assessments. Urhobo-speaking students who receive social studies instruction in English without adequate linguistic transition support clearly exhibit this phenomenon. As a result, they may encounter it challenging to articulate ideas clearly and engage in critical discussions, thereby affecting their academic outcomes.

Despite the benefits of mother-tongue instruction, educational policies in Nigeria emphasize English as the medium of instruction beyond the lower primary level. According to [Nwokocha and Adejumo \(2023\)](#), this transition often disrupts students' learning patterns, as they must adjust to a language that is not their primary mode of communication. For Urhobo-speaking students, this shift can contribute to a decline in academic performance, particularly in subjects like social studies, which require interpretative skills and contextual understanding. To bridge this gap, scholars advocate for bilingual education models where indigenous languages are integrated into classroom instruction. According to [Igbokwe \(2021\)](#), adopting a dual-language approach can improve students' comprehension and academic success by allowing them to process information in their mother tongue before transitioning to English. Implementing such strategies for Urhobo-speaking students in social studies classrooms could enhance their performance and foster greater interest in the subject.

**Statement of the problem**

Since the introduction of formal education by the colonial masters, English Language was introduced as a medium of instruction in our schools. Emphasis has always been on the use of the English language in all educational institutions in Nigeria as the various policies of education have classified the subject as a major discipline. The academic performance of students in Social Studies can be influenced by various factors, and among them, is the use of the language of instruction, socio-economic status, gender, and school location. The academic performance of students over the years has been good but may be better if they are taught using the mother tongue as a language of instruction. However, this researcher would want to look at the use of Urhobo as a mother tongue as the language of instruction to see if the academic performance of students in Social Studies will become better if they are taught with it than when taught with English language. As a child, I might learn faster and better if taught in the mother tongue at the upper basic level of education. Mother tongue instruction can help the child to acquire knowledge and Social Studies content more easily and quickly, explain information properly and correctly, acquire practical and manipulative skills easily and develop desirable attitudes towards people. Therefore, the problem of this research in question form is “what the effect of mother tongue (Urhobo) and socio-economic status on academic performance of upper basic students in Social Studies is, in Delta State.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study:

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

**Hypotheses**

Two null hypotheses were formulated for the study and tested at a 0.05 level of significance.

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

**2. METHOD**

This study employed a quasi-experimental pre-test and post-test control group research design. 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. Employing a purposive sampling strategy, a sample of 100 students from Upper Basic 8 Social Studies were meticulously chosen to suit the requirements of the study. 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. 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. The reliability of the SSMTT was carried out using the Cronbach alpha technique; to achieve this, fifty copies of the instrument were administered in a single administration. This quasi-experimental study was carried out during the third term in the academic session of 2023/2024, spanning six weeks, and encompassing one instructional lesson plan that was written in Urhobo.

Subsequently, the social studies teachers who had undergone the orientation were entrusted with the task of teaching the students two topics in social studies, "marriage" and "drug abuse," using the Urhobo and administering the study's instruments during the pre-tests and post-tests. The control group received normal instruction in the English language without the incorporation of the mother tongue. Before initiating the lessons, a pre-test was administered to all subjects in the group, ensuring a baseline measurement of their knowledge. The content covered in the lesson included topics such as "Marriage" and "Drug Abuse."

The data collected during the pre-test and post-test phases were subjected to rigorous statistical analysis; this goal is to accurately investigate the significance and impact of mother tongue on the academic performance of students in social studies. This analytical process encompassed descriptive statistics, including measures of central tendency such as the mean and measures of data dispersion such as the standard deviation, effectively for answering the research questions. To test all null hypotheses, the researcher employed a t-test.

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### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### Results

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

**Table 1.** Mean and Standard Deviation showing the difference in the Academic Performance

Group	N	Pretest		Posttest		Mean Gain
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Urhobo	50	70.40	7.09	88.48	8.26	18.08
Control	50	71.08	6.68	73.01	9.71	1.93

Table 1 shows the result for the effect of using the Urhobo 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 the Urhobo language as their mother tongue and those taught with the English language. The post-test mean score for the Urhobo group was 88.48, while that of the English language (control) group was 73.01. This difference clearly shows the positive effect of using the mother tongue for teaching, as it brings the student's closer home. Also, this group performance might be because the Urhobo 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 the Urhobo language) and the control group underwent a pre-test to assess their initial understanding of the topics. Before teaching with the mother tongue, the mean score of students in the Urhobo group was 70.40, with a standard deviation of 7.09, indicating moderate performance with some variability among students. The control group, which did not receive any treatment and was taught in the English language, had a higher mean pre-test score of 71.08 and a standard deviation of 6.68, suggesting a slightly higher baseline of understanding.

After teaching with the Urhobo language, the group experienced a dramatic performance improvement. A higher standard deviation of 8.26 in the post-test scores also suggests that, although the overall group improved, there was a wider range in

academic performance. Also, the mean gain of 18.08, a measure of the difference between pre-test and post-test scores, further gives credence to the effect of mother tongue (Urhobo language) as compared to the use of conventional language (English). The significant effect of these results was tested in hypothesis 1.

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

**Table 2.** Mean and Standard Deviation Showing the Moderating Effect of Socioeconomic Status

	SES	N	Mean	SD
Posttest	High	29	90.28	8.40
	Low	21	88.40	6.38

Table 2 shows the moderating effect of socioeconomic status on Urhobo language and academic performance of Social Studies upper basic students in Delta State. The table shows the difference in the mean scores of students from high and low socioeconomic status, with those from high socioeconomic status slightly higher than that of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Students from high socioeconomic status had a post-test mean of 90.28 as against the post-test mean of students from low socioeconomic status of 88.40. The high-SES students experienced a small increase in their academic performance. However, the mean gain for high SES students is approximately 2.12. This suggests that students from high SES experienced a greater mean gain score compared to those from low SES; whether this difference is significant or not was determined by the results of hypothesis 2.

### Testing of the Hypotheses

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

**Table 3.** T-test Table Showing Significant Difference in the Academic Performance

Group	N	Mean	df	t-calculated	t-critical	Decision
Urhobo	50	88.74	98	-.280	.001	Rejected
English	50	73.08		-.192	9.71	

Table 3 represents the test for hypothesis 1, that there is no significant difference in the academic performance of Social Studies Upper Basic students taught with the Urhobo language as their mother tongue and those taught with the English language. The results showed that the treatment variable (Urhobo language) had a statistically significant impact on students' academic performance, as indicated by a p-value of .001, which is less than the significant level of 0.05. This implies that the use of the mother tongue contributed to a meaningful difference in academic performance between the two groups, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis, which proposed that the Urhobo language as a mother tongue does not affect academic performance.

On the other hand, the control group did not have a significant effect on academic performance, with a calculated  $t$  value of .192. This indicates that the control group did not significantly have any effect on the academic performance of the students. Overall, the findings suggest that incorporating mother tongue into social studies education can have a positive and significant effect on the academic performance of students in Upper Basic Social Studies.

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

**Table 4.** T-test Table Showing the Moderating Effect of Socioeconomic

Group	N	Mean	df	t-calculated	t-critical	Decision
High	29	90.28	48	.596	.119	Accepted
Low	21	88.40		.624		

Table 4 shows the test for hypothesis 2, that socioeconomic status did not moderate the effect of the Urhobo language as the mother tongue on the academic performance of Upper Basic Students in Social Studies. The results showed a critical  $t$ -value of .119; this is greater than the significant level of 0.05; therefore, the null hypothesis is hereby accepted. Also, a calculated value of .596 for students from high SES and .624 for students from low SES was obtained. The implication of this is that socioeconomic status does not have any moderating effect on the Urhobo language as a mother tongue and academic performance. Therefore, the usage of mother tongue to promote social studies students' academic performance transcends socioeconomic status of the students, as children from poor or rich homes will adopt their mother tongue if they are exposed to it. However, other factors may moderate mother tongue.

## Discussion

The first hypothesis shows that there is a significant difference in the academic performance of social studies students taught in Urhobo as their mother tongue compared to those taught in the English language. We assume that the learners may have started learning the language after developing fundamental speaking skills in their first language. Therefore, they have become simultaneous multilingualists, hence their improvement in academic performance. This finding highlights the crucial role of language in learning. Students who receive instruction in their mother tongue often perform better academically because they can easily comprehend complex concepts, relate new information to prior knowledge, and express their ideas more effectively. According to literature, mother-tongue instruction enhances cognitive processing, reduces language barriers, and fosters active participation in the learning process, all of which contribute to improved academic outcomes. On the other hand, students taught in English may struggle with comprehension, especially if they are not yet proficient in the language, leading to difficulties in grasping social studies concepts and applying them in assessments.



Furthermore, learning in a familiar linguistic environment minimizes anxiety and enhances classroom engagement. When students understand the language of instruction, they are more likely to ask questions, engage in discussions, and develop higher-order thinking skills. In contrast, those taught in a second language often rely on rote memorization rather than deep understanding, which can hinder their academic performance. Additionally, the use of the Urhobo language as a mother tongue in teaching social studies allows for cultural relevance, as students can better relate to historical and societal topics when explained in a language that aligns with their lived experiences. This finding aligns with the assertion of [Hanzawa \(2024\)](#) and [Padilla & Chen \(2025\)](#), who submitted that students learn more effectively when taught in their first language, as it supports their cognitive and academic development while gradually strengthening their second-language proficiency.

The second hypothesis revealed that socioeconomic status does not significantly moderate the relationship between Urhobo as a mother tongue and the academic performance of Upper Basic students in social studies, suggesting that language of instruction plays a more direct role in student achievement than financial or social background. The authors therefore assumed that regardless of whether students come from high-, middle-, or low-income families, those taught in their mother tongue tend to perform similarly. Another possible assumption of the study is that linguistic familiarity fosters comprehension and critical thinking, enabling students across different socioeconomic backgrounds to engage effectively with social studies content.

Additionally, mother-tongue instruction reduces linguistic barriers that might otherwise disadvantage students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who may have limited exposure to English outside the classroom. By learning in Urhobo, students across different financial standings can better grasp abstract concepts, express themselves confidently, and actively participate in lessons. This aligns with findings by [Marcilese et al. \(2019\)](#), [Bock et al. \(2022\)](#), and [Akol \(2024\)](#); these studies supported the notion that mother-tongue education enhances cognitive development and academic performance, independent of socioeconomic factors.

The research aimed to provide a more profound understanding of how mother tongue and socio-economic status can influence academic performance in social studies. With this study, we hope to validate and elaborate on the benefits of using the mother tongue for social studies education and, by implication, its educational policies. This can also influence the teacher lesson implementation through the incorporation of recommendations from this study. Secondly, the findings could help educational policymakers and educators of social studies develop benchmarks for integrating mother tongue into the social studies curriculum to maximize its benefit. Thirdly, the need for new educational strategies that can actively foster inclusiveness, equity, and dynamism is a practical implication of this research. Finally, leveraging the inherent cognitive ability of indigenous children in social studies is a practical implication of this study.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that students taught social studies using Urhobo as their mother tongue could perform significantly better than those taught in the English language. This finding underscores the effectiveness of mother-tongue instruction in enhancing students' comprehension, retention, and engagement in learning. Additionally, the study establishes that socioeconomic status does not significantly moderate the relationship between Urhobo language instruction and academic performance. This implies that the benefits of mother-tongue instruction are experienced across different economic backgrounds, reinforcing the idea that language familiarity is a more critical factor in academic success than financial status.

Educational policymakers should implement policies that encourage the use of Urhobo and other indigenous languages as mediums of instruction, particularly in early education, to improve students' understanding and performance. Parents and local communities should be encouraged to support mother-tongue learning at home to reinforce classroom instruction. This study contributes to educational research by providing empirical evidence that mother-tongue instruction significantly enhances students' academic performance in social studies. It further establishes that socioeconomic status does not influence the effectiveness of mother-tongue education, highlighting the universal cognitive benefits of learning in a familiar language.

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