Yoruba Proverbs as a Useful Resource in Heritage Language Acquisition

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Abstract

Acquisition of Yoruba language and culture by heritage speakers is complicated and often requires multiple frameworks beyond instruction provided by trained teachers or planned classes in academic institutions. Such frameworks can utilize the existing motivation of parents of heritage Yoruba speakers to facilitate the Yoruba language and culture acquisition of their children. This paper examines the literature on the importance of Yoruba proverbs and its capability to facilitate the teaching of Yoruba language and culture to heritage learners. In addition, as evident in the Ile-Ife study, where increase in the knowledge of Yoruba proverbs was positively correlated with increase in Yoruba language and culture competence (Adegbite, 2025a; 2025b), proverbs instruction when situated within a strict pro-Yoruba family language policy and facilitated by parents tends to increase the competence of heritage learners and their excitement at continuing to learn Yoruba language. The paper further suggests action steps for parents in using proverbs as a tool for the Yoruba heritage instruction of their children. The study concludes that Yoruba proverbs as tools for heritage language acquisition is part of the indigenous knowledge systems that are required for an optimal Afrocentric education of heritage Yoruba language and culture learners.

Keywords: Yoruba proverbs, heritage language acquisition, family language policy (FLP), language acquisition framework

Introduction

Language education and acquisition are highly complex linguistic phenomena (Butler, 2013), where acquisition of a language includes not only linguistic competence, but also performance socially and culturally. Heritage speakers of a language usually require more effort and time in learning their heritage language compared to the language of their immediate environment. Adegbite (2024) posits that language is of germane importance to the enhancement of an individual's identity which conveys their codified cultural make

up and genetic origin. Parents of Yoruba children born abroad increasingly desire their children to acquire their heritage language and culture despite the deficit in access to human and material resources for the purpose.

Most teaching and acquisition frameworks for heritage speakers of Yoruba language in the diaspora have necessitated the employment of trained teachers or planned classes in academic institutions. Despite the efforts of teachers and scholars in this regard, there is still a huge gap in the desire of parents for their children to learn Yoruba language and the actual competence of children in the language and culture. There is need for a complementary alternative to structuring the teaching of Yoruba only for academic institutions and by trained teachers (Adegbite, 2025b). This research explores the literature on Yoruba proverbs and its importance in the acquisition of Yoruba language and culture. As justification for the proposal of a proverbs framework for teaching Yoruba language and culture to heritage language learners, the paper examines the Ile-Ife study, an experimental study of children learning Yoruba language and culture using proverbs in the Yoruba city of Ile-Ife, southwest Nigeria. The current author argues that the effectiveness of proverbs in teaching Yoruba language and culture in the Ile-Ife study can be transferable to heritage language learners of Yoruba language and culture in diasporic contexts such as the United States.

This study contributes to the knowledge of how Yoruba language and culture can be systematically taught by parents within the home with little or no professional assistance. Furthermore, the framework explicated in the study provides an additional teaching methodology for scholars interested in language learning, bilingualism, and indigenous language preservation.

Heritage Language Maintenance

According to Fishman (1978), heritage language loss typically takes place across three generations: (i) immigrant-bilinguals, (ii) limited bilinguals, and (iii) monolinguals. Nesteruk (2010) affirms that in the United States, for example, children from various national origins and backgrounds become monolingual or English-dominant by the time they reach adolescence. In cases where immigrant-parents have high levels of education and income, studies have shown that this raises the probability that their children would speak only English language (Alba et al, 2002; Bills et al., 1995). However, if the first generation, with the help of conducive linguistic and social factors are successful at making the second-generation balanced bilinguals in the heritage and host languages, it becomes easier for the third generation to acquire the heritage language.

The family is "the most common and inescapable basis of mother tongue transmission, bonding, use and stabilization" (Fishman, 1991 p. 94). There are various factors that lead to language loss ranging from government policies to natural disasters (Adegbite, 2020), but the primary domain of intergenerational language loss is the family. To put more concretely, "the loss of natural intergenerational transmission was recognized as the key marker of language loss, and it occurred within the family" and for the reason

which "family was added to the state as a domain relevant to language policy" (Spolsky, 2008 p. 2). The reversing language shift model theory provides a framework to retain or recreate minority languages within the family, community and state. As Fishman (2001) affirms, efforts within this framework are not anti-majority language(s) but rather enable effective globalization through the optimality of multilingualism. Adegbite (2025b) further propounds the Family Reversing Language Shift framework which establishes the home as the primary ground for Yoruba language acquisition, and children and parents as the major stakeholders in the process. Intergenerational language transmission is best achieved when parents and children use an indigenous/ethnic language in the home since the family and community are critical for the maintenance of 'home' language. Small cultures can inform, to a large extent, the language choice of members in a way that eventually informs their larger community. This approach is a bottom-top one, and has, as its core actors, parents and their child(ren) in a bilingual home.

Proverbs as a Vital Tool for Yoruba Communication and Instruction

According to Akporobaro & Emovon (1994), the proverbs that a community or group of people use is otherwise their ethnography and often reveals their way of life, social values, moral truths, philosophy, and criticism of life. They facilitate the transmission of culture, social morality, philosophy, and values intergenerationally (Owomoyela, 2005). The brevity of proverbs makes them efficient tools that can be utilized in the transfer of coded information to the exclusion of non-interlocutors or present individuals who do not possess mastery of the language and culture. Ademowo and Balogun (2014, p.6) posit that proverbs are "models of compressed or forceful language that make people behave according to norms and mores of the land." Subsequently, Adegbite (2024) affirms that some proverbs are difficult to fully interpret until they are situated within their context of creation. Proverbs are carefully crafted with meticulous selection of terms, concepts, and grammatical combination; this is sometimes layered with specific reference to a historical event. In spite of the simplicity yet complexity of proverbs, competent Yoruba speakers who are knowledgeable in the culture and the construction of proverbs can form new ones for their unique situation.

Proverbs are, according to the International Reading Association (2003) cited in Adegbite (2024), (a) passed down through time with little change in form, (b) mostly used metaphorically which necessitates the need to understand their nature to unravel their meanings, and (c) often use rhetorical devices such as rhyme, parallel structure, repetition, imagery, and alliteration to make them more memorable. In terms of communication and the sociocultural relationship among people in the Yoruba culture, the proverb: *Òwe ni ẹṣin ọ̀rọ̀, bí ọ̀rọ̀ bá sọnù, òwe la fi ń wa*—"Proverb is a horse (commuter) for words; in the case words are lost, proverbs are used to search them out"—conveys that Yoruba proverbs are a key part of understanding the language and culture. This makes its use in heritage language instruction even more essential. Adegbite (2022) highlights some proverbs and

their functions in Yoruba language and culture acquisition:

1. *A kì í jẹ méjì ní abà Àlàdẹ; ẹnì kan kì í jẹ iṣu kí ó tún jẹ iyán.*
   "We do not eat two things in Àlàdé's village; one person does not eat yam and also pounded yam"
   (Proverb on warning, caution, and advice)
2. *A kì í torí pé ònà jìn kí á padà sẹ́yìn.*
   "One does not because a distance is far turn back"
   (Proverb on sympathy and encouragement)
3. *Bí a ó ti tó kì í jẹ kí á hu ìwà burúkú; bí a ó ti mọ kì í jẹ kí á hu ìwà rere.*
   "One's potential high achievements prevent one from behaving badly; one's potential stagnancy prevents one from behaving in a good way."
   (Proverb on reproach and punishment)
4. *Ẹni tí kò bá mọ ọ́ jó kì í jìnà sí onílù.*
   "One who does not know how to dance does not stay far away from the drummer."
   (Proverb on cooperation and care for others)
5. *Adìyẹ funfun kò mọ ara rẹ̀ ní àgbà.*
   "A white fowl does not recognize itself as superior."
   (Proverb on responsive leadership)

Early childhood education is crucial to an individual's emotional, social, and mental development (Osanyin, 2002). As stated by Abidogun and Adebule (2013, p. 267), it constitutes "the most impressionable years as they lay the foundation for the development of the human personality." Despite several merits of Yoruba being the primary language of instruction for Yoruba children in southwestern Nigeria, English is prioritized in public and official spheres which has translated to a reduction in Yoruba as a primary language in Yoruba homes (Adegbite, 2025b). Largely speaking, in Nigeria, "indigenous languages suffer neglect and are most restricted to their domains or regions of use" (Adegbija (2004) cited in Abidogun and Adebule (2013, p. 268)). Proverbs as a tool for Yoruba language instruction and acquisition is justified by numerous arguments in the literature for the need to employ perspectives and teaching frameworks that are indigenous to children in the facilitation of a system of education for them (Friere, 2004, 1973; Merriam, 2010). In agreement, Avoseh (2012, pp. 236-237) posits that "every aspect of a community's life and values in indigenous Africa provide the theoretical framework for education… the framework provided by proverbs affirms the ancestors as the real theorists of Afrocentric education". The employment of proverbs as a tool for teaching means the whole community as the classroom and everyone being a teacher or the student depending on context. In short, learning with Yoruba proverbs is more holistic and less confined to the four walls of the classroom (Adegbite, 2025b). Children additionally learn culture and social integration in addition to their language acquisition. Boahene (2006) cited

in Adegbite (2024) identifies five reasons proverbs are important in children's language and good citizenship development from within the home: (i) proverbs provide different points of view not amplified by textbooks, (ii) proverbs provide insights into events or personalities and poses exciting questions to children, (iii) proverbs help to explain and illustrate the complexity of cultures, (iv) proverbs encourage children to use thinking skills and strengthen their analytical ability, and (v) proverbs help bridge the cultural values gap between African and other western cultures in an ethnically and racially diverse world

Family Language Policy and Planning

Family language policy is a codified procedure that is overt and explicit in relation to language use in the home and among family members (Lanza, 2007; Schiffman, 1996; Shohamy, 2006). Family language policy is often established based on how a family perceives social and political structures within the society in addition to directions of language shift or change (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009; Zhang & Tsung, 2019). This is unlike language policies on a national scale, which are typically enacted and executed to influence and/or change processes and structures of the political and social terrain of a state. Family language policies are determined through a family's view of the language combination that will support the social standing of the family in addition to improving the same, based on the changing linguistic situation of their context. This view is pursued through actions in three areas which Zhang and Tsung (2019) describe as status planning, corpus planning and acquisition planning. With a consideration that is connected to the success of the children in school in addition to unconscious and implicit factors that make them emotionally involved in their initial resolution to combat or fit into societal language maintenance or shift, parents map out whether and when to use particular language(s) with their children and consciously evaluate the success of their decision in the cognitive and social development and advancement of their children within the society (King & Fogle, 2008; Schwartz and Verschik, 2013; Tannenbaum, 2012; Zhang and Tsung, 2019).

Within the field of Family Language Policy (FLP), the family is at the central position for preserving languages. The family is regarded as a community of practice that has "its own norms for language use" (Lanza, 2007, p.47) such as its "own ways of speaking, acting, and believing (Schwartz and Verschik, 2013, p.1). FLP is thus essential to the preservation of minority languages. As the basic unit of any society, the family is the space for the development of a positive or negative language ideology in addition to an active or passive method of acquiring or learning a language. According to King and Fogle (2013), the emphasis of FLP is on the balance in the use of languages within the family. To this end, FLP facilitates bi/multilingual homes. In other words, family language policies are essential tools especially in bi/multilingual homes to maintain their more than one language in equilibrium or reasonable proportion. Spolsky (2004) examines three areas in which a family language policy can be examined: (i) language ideology (goals, plans, intentions, and beliefs concerning language development), (ii) language practices (intra-family language communication), and (iii) language management (ways of regulating

linguistic development). The interaction in FLP is primarily between the parent(s) and the child(ren). The role of parents is key for consistency because they are facilitators of the family language policy and often determine the language use pattern in the family domain (Wang, 2017).

Family language policies can be implicit or explicit. Implicit language maintenance strategies include actions like repeating what the child said in a majority language in their mother tongue and employing their mother tongue for the rest of the conversation; however, there are no specific instructions to the children on which language to speak and when. Explicit family language policies are more prescriptive for children, especially when they are young. Actions could include parents telling children to speak only their mother tongue while at home. Adegbite (2025) describes the result of explicit language practices by children and their parents in his study of 51 children aged 7-13 in Ile-Ife, Nigeria. After the three-month study, these children were more positively disposed to and used Yoruba language more at home, in school, and in other places. This is similar to Schwartz's (2008) finding where the positive attitude of surveyed Russian-Hebrew parents' children and their explicit family language policy practices resulted in more competent knowledge of the vocabulary of their mother tongue. Research has suggested various methodological tools that can enhance Yoruba language acquisition within family language policies. These include folk songs (Ayoola, 2023), folklores (Ajayi, 2019), personal names (Akinyemi, 2005), greetings (Schleicher, 1997), proverbs (Adegbite, 2020; 2022; 2025), and outdoor games (Adegbite and Elton, 2019).

FLPs can also be defined based on the ideological orientation of parents which can be observed in their beliefs, attitudes, and practices for the development and sustenance of their children's L1 and L2. Adegbite (2025) in his Family Reversing Language Shift Framework categorizes FLP types, based on Altman's (2014) categorization, as (a) Strict Pro-Minority (SPM), (b) Mild Pro-Minority (MPM), and (c) Pro-Bilingual (PB) with "minority" to mean the language which is dominated or under threat of being dominated by the more accepted or government sanctioned language, irrespective of the number of speakers. Table 1 below shows two of the 3 types of FLPs listed above and their characteristics, modified to specifically refer to Yoruba as the minority language and English as the majority language:

Yoruba Language Acquisition Frameworks	**Characteristics**
Strict Pro-Minority	- Parent(s) believe that Yoruba language should be preserved. - Parent(s) believe only Yoruba language should be spoken at home. - Parent(s) forbid the use of English language at home, but make very few exceptions (e.g., expressions only accessible in English language). - Parent(s) employ some 'reversing language shift' techniques such as rebukes for using English language and rewards for increased competence in Yoruba language. - Parent(s) encourage and facilitate participation of children in pro-Yoruba language contexts outside the home.
Mild Pro-Minority	- Parent(s) think that Yoruba language should be preserved. - Parent(s) do not forbid the child's use of English language at home. - If English language is encouraged, it is instrumental, for example, teaching literacy to prepare for school. - Parent(s) speak Yoruba language but may codeswitch themselves. - Parent(s) encourage participation of children in Yoruba language contexts outside the home.

Table 1: strict and mild pro-Yoruba language acquisition frameworks and their characteristics

Adegbite (2025) employed proverbs as a methodological tool in the family language policy of children and their parents in the study of 51 participant conducted in Ile-Ife, Nigeria (The Ile-Ife Study). This was done within the Family Reversing Language Shift framework which advocates the SPM family language policy type (see table 1 above) as essential to achieving sustainable results in language rejuvenation and/maintenance. By the end of the study, most parents of children in the experimental group had employed either the SPM or the MPM policies which led to a significant increase in the motivation and proficiency of their children. The Ile-Ife Study is described below.

The Ile-Ife Study

The Ile-Ife study (see Adegbite, 2025a; 2025b) was an experimental study conducted in Ile-Ife southwest Nigeria, comprised of 51 participants, thirty in the experimental group and 21 in the control group. They were aged 7-13 and in classes that ranged from Primary four to Junior Secondary School (JSS) three. Indirect participants in the study were parents of the children who were participants in the study. These parents were recruited to facilitate the teaching of their children Yoruba proverbs using a Yoruba proverbs book, *Awíyé Owe Yorùbá* (Adegbite, 2022), which the current author published for the research. Other facilitators besides the research team and parents were neighbors, friends, and the schoolteachers of the children.

Participants in the experimental group were taught Yoruba proverbs by the research team for 12 weeks (one to two hours, twice a week). *Àwíyé Òwe Yorùbá* was well designed for home study so that parents reported no problem using it to facilitate Yoruba proverbs lessons at home. Children reported asking questions or clarifying concept/issues from their parents, friends, neighbors, and Yoruba teachers in school. Participants in the control group did not receive any intervention from the research team. However, they were given all materials used by the experimental group including the proverbs textbook at the end of the study. Evaluation of both experimental and control groups were conducted simultaneously before and after the 12-week Yoruba proverbs instruction and facilitation sessions. For a credible result at the end of the study, results of the study were based off of data from (a) a study-tailored questionnaire with sections that elicited demographic information, use of Yoruba language, knowledge of Yoruba proverbs, and attitude to Yoruba language and culture, (b) pre- and post-study listening, speaking, reading, and writing tests, (c) attendance and participation in study sessions, (d) completion of assignments from the resource textbook, and (e) ethnographic notes that included conversation with children, parents, teachers, and family members.

Findings of the study justified the previous studies (see Agbaje, 2002; Banjo, 1979; Avoseh, 2012) that the brevity, wisdom, and stored experience in Yoruba proverbs can facilitate the acquisition and learning of Yoruba language and culture. At the end of the research, children in the experimental group were more competent in Yoruba language than children in the control group. Also, their knowledge of Yoruba culture had significantly increased compared to that of the children in the control group. They were able to use Yoruba proverbs more, produce new proverbs, and were more knowledgeable in general history, norms, and ideology of the Yoruba. Furthermore, the children in the experimental group had an increased motivation to continue to acquire and learn the Yoruba language and culture, and that motivation had a direct effect on the motivation of their parents who began to employ a family language policy that prioritized Yoruba in their homes.

The Ile-Ife study was a response to several calls in the literature to decolonize and diversify African education system (Megbowon & Uwah, 2021). Scholars on African languages and cultures including Yoruba have emphasized the need to employ the home as an important foundation for language and culture acquisition in addition to employing indigenous knowledge systems such as stories, proverbs, and metaphors (Adegbite 2022;

2024; Avoseh, 2012; Baloyi & Ramose, 2016; Banga et al., 2015; Kaya, 2013; Megbowon & Uwah, 2021). Other suggested indigenous language systems specific to Yoruba but also applicable to other indigenous languages are games (Adegbite and Elton, 2019; Ibitoye and Olaifa, 2018), folk songs and folklore (Ajayi, 2019; Ayoola, 2023), Yoruba personal names (Akinyemi, 2005), and greetings (Schleicher, 1997). The Ile-Ife study has proven that when indigenous knowledge systems are employed within an applicable framework, Yoruba language and culture can be competently acquired even in a diasporic or heritage context.

Using Proverbs for Yoruba Heritage Language and Culture Acquisition

In the Ile-Ife study, the use of proverbs within a structured framework improved the competence and motivation of children in the experimental group in spite of all the factors responsible for the endangerment of Yoruba language and culture in Nigeria (see Adegbite, 2003; Afolabi and Igboanusi, 2023; Balogun, 2013; Crystal, 2000; Fabunmi and Salawu, 2005). These factors similarly cause the loss of Yoruba language and culture in diasporic and heritage contexts. For this reason, the framework applied in the Ile-Ife study would prove highly efficient in the revitalization and maintenance of Yoruba language for heritage learners.

Most parents of heritage learners employ language acquisition frameworks that are pro-bilingual or pro-majority language with emphasis on the major language of their context such as the English language for most Yoruba parents in the United States. A strict pro-minority language framework is suggested for parents and their heritage learners in order to achieve sustainable competence in Yoruba language revitalization and maintenance. Adegbite (2025) found that strict and mild pro-Yoruba language and culture acquisition frameworks (see Table 1 above), especially the strict version, when employed by parents in the acquisition process of their children, led to a significant increase in the motivation and proficiency of children in Yoruba language and culture.

Table 1 above can be contrasted with Table 2 below which exemplifies a pro-bilingual Yoruba language acquisition framework which Adegbite (2025) affirms does not result in desired competency in Yoruba language and culture:

Yoruba Language Acquisition Framework	**Characteristics**
Pro-Bilingual	- Parent(s) think English-Yoruba bilingualism should be developed. - Parents invest in both languages and expose children to both environments with English language maintaining dominance. - Parent(s) may codeswitch at home. - Parent(s) encourage only pro-English and pro-bilingual language contexts outside the home.

Table 2: Pro-bilingual language acquisition framework and its characteristics

To facilitate competence in Yoruba language and culture in a heritage learning context, determining factors may be human or non-human. Human factors are the actors, who may be primary or secondary, whose actions (or inactions) influence the language choice or ideology of a heritage learner. These include parents, relatives, friends, neighbors, community members, school administrators, and the government. From the above, Adegbite (2025) notes that parents and their children are the primary stakeholders, and their ideology and set action steps matter most. Non-human factors include home linguistic context, ideology, location, language resources, and community linguistic terrain. The interconnection of factors in family language acquisition frameworks make it important to advocate for a strict pro-Yoruba version. To use proverbs to teach heritage Yoruba children learning the language, the strict pro-Yoruba family language framework must be observed. In addition, parents should take the actions below as reported by parents in the Ile-Ife study who witnessed a rapid positive shift in the Yoruba language and culture competence of their children by the end of the study:

1. Outline at least an hour each day for children to learn new proverbs or discuss proverbs that have been prior learnt.
2. Increase the use of proverbs in communicating with children. Be ready to provide the meaning of such proverbs, and challenge children to communicate their thoughts with proverbs as well by framing situations like those of proverbs they have prior learnt.
3. After children become familiar with some proverbs, have them discuss the local and global implications of the messages within the proverb.
4. Children should keep a vocabulary journal. Parents should do occasional tests on their knowledge of words in this journal with treats or gifts as a reward for excellence.
5. Similarly, children should have a journal for the collection of proverbs. Parents should supervise the correct classification of these proverbs into correct functional categories.

6. Parents should provide historical and contextual information of proverbs.
7. Having games and activities that exemplify the use of proverbs will also aid the interest of the children. Role play activities would fit this description. For example, the elderly can use a proverb like *B'ọmọdẹ bá ní aṣọ bí àgbà, kò lè ní àkísà bí àgbà* "Even if a child has more clothes than the elderly, they cannot have as much rags" while children in the roleplay use proverbs like *Ọmọdẹ gbọ́n, àgbà gbọ́n la fi dá Ilẹ̀ Ifẹ̀* "The joint wisdom of children and adults was employed in the creation of the land of Ife".
8. Proverbs should be extended to practical fields such as Physics: *lálá tó r'òkè, ilẹ̀ ló ń bọ̀* "whatever goes up must come down"; Agriculture: *ọ̀gẹ̀dẹ̀ ló wo kòkó yè, kó tó di igi burúkú* "The banana tree saw the cocoa tree to maturity before it became a bad tree"; and Technology: *ogún ọdún tí rélùwêe ti ń rìn, ìwájú ni yó ma bá ilẹ̀* "No matter the number of years the train keeps moving, the ground shall continuously be before it"

Conclusion

The current study employs a review of literature and the Ile-Ife study to affirm the importance and great potentials embedded in using Yoruba proverbs to teach Yoruba language and culture to heritage Yoruba children. The study also suggests steps in facilitating the language acquisition process in English-majority language contexts such as the United States of America. However, if optimal results must be achieved, the suggested steps in teaching Yoruba language and culture to heritage learners must be situated within a strict pro-Yoruba family language framework. The method and steps suggested in this study mirror the framework employed in the Ile-Ife study which resulted in increased competence and motivation for children-participants and increased motivation to facilitate Yoruba language acquisition for their parents. The current study is a theoretical foundation upon which other scholars can build experimental studies that prove or disprove the exemplified framework as workable in diasporic contexts. An arising question is how the framework and steps exemplified in this research can be executed if parents of heritage learners are not proficient in Yoruba proverbs or the language itself. This is a limitation of the current study that calls for further research.

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