



INTRODUCING BASIC ERUMANEN LANGUAGE: A BASIS FOR IMPROVING THE COMMUNICATION SKILLS OF YOUNG LEARNERS

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Abstract

This action research examined the integration of the Erumanen language into early childhood education as a strategy for enhancing the communication skills of young learners while preserving indigenous culture and fostering multilingual competence. Using a qualitative, multiple-case-study design, the study purposively selected five participants — an elder, a woman, a person with disability, a youth, and a family head — with substantial background in language advocacy. Data were gathered through interviews, focus group discussions, observation, and document review, and were analyzed thematically following Yin's (2014) framework for identifying experiences, describing phenomena, interpreting meaning, and clustering themes. Findings were organized into three subtopics comprising ten themes: language integration (the nature of the Erumanen language, early-education language, young learners' language challenges, and the benefits of language integration); language and cultural enhancement (the extent of the Erumanen language, enhancement of language users, cultural awareness development, and young learners' language development); and the influence of language introduction on young learners (the influence of basic language introduction and the influence of language adaptation). The study found that early exposure to the Erumanen language enriches vocabulary, promotes cognitive flexibility, and strengthens interpersonal communication skills. It recommends the wider adoption of indigenous-language instruction in early education as a foundation for linguistic and social development, supported by teacher training and culturally relevant materials.

Keywords: *communication, indigenous language, language integration, young learners*



Introduction

The Erumanen language is among the world's endangered languages. The United Nations' International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032) has renewed global attention to its preservation (UNESCO, 2022), a concern echoed at both the national and local levels as government agencies and communities work to reverse the decline of indigenous tongues.

The Erumanen ne Menuvu language is heavily influenced by the region's dominant tribal languages, and many of its words, spellings, and pronunciations are gradually being lost. Introducing basic Erumanen vocabulary to the younger generation is therefore essential to sustaining the language's usability (SIL International, 2019). The language has thirteen documented varieties — Derupuwanen, Dungguanen, Ilembacken, Ilentungen, Iliyanen, Isuluken, Kirinteken, Lehitanen, Livunganen, Mulitaan, Pulengiyen, Simuniyen, and Sinimburanen — spoken across 341 barangays in 40 municipalities spanning eight provinces: Northern Cotabato, Southern Cotabato, Southern Bukidnon, Northern and Southern Maguindanao, Southern Lanao, Sarangani, and Northern Davao (Pobre, 2022).

At the same time, the communication skills of many young people remain inconsistent across the core literacies of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and numeracy. Structured language training has been shown to improve clarity of expression and strengthen feedback exchange — skills that in turn support negotiation, teamwork, self-knowledge, and problem-solving — while caregivers play a critical role as transmitters of language that warrants greater recognition (Torres, Sampaio, & Caracas, 2022).

Despite this, a practical knowledge gap persists in the literature: most prior research on Erumanen and comparable indigenous languages has examined speaking skills in theoretical terms, with little practical or action-oriented investigation into how such languages might actually be introduced to learners (Miles, 2017). This study addresses that gap by examining the practical introduction of basic Erumanen words as a means of empowering non-speakers to use the language, guided by the mnemonic WORD — Working, Orienting, Recalling, Describing, Sustaining — as a framework for its value and use.

Language Integration

Prior research links language integration to cognitive, academic, and social development. Multilingualism enhances cognitive flexibility, problem-solving, and creativity, and bilingual individuals typically display stronger executive control in switching between tasks (Bialystok, 2011). Students who maintain their first language while acquiring a second tend to develop stronger literacy and comprehension skills, and language integration more broadly fosters cultural understanding, cross-cultural awareness, and reduced prejudice (Cummins, 2008; Kramsch, 2009). Translanguaging pedagogy — allowing students to draw on their full linguistic repertoire — has likewise been shown to enhance learning outcomes and inclusion (García & Lin, 2016), while dual-language programs strengthen students' linguistic and cognitive skills more broadly (Genesee, 2008). In organizational settings, language integration policies have similarly been associated with improved collaboration and productivity (Neeley, 2017).

Language and Cultural Awareness

Language is central to the transmission of tradition, belief, and value across generations, and — together with the environment in which a person is raised — helps shape distinct cultural and linguistic identities (Hamidi, 2023). Learning an additional language strengthens intercultural competence, supports identity negotiation, and helps learners engage with a broader range of cultural perspectives (Norton, 2013); bilingual and multilingual



individuals, correspondingly, tend to show greater cultural sensitivity and adaptability in cross-cultural settings (Risager, 2006). Because linguistic proficiency alone is insufficient, language education should also cultivate cultural knowledge so learners can engage meaningfully with people from different backgrounds (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013), particularly through immersive experiences that expose learners to authentic sociocultural contexts (Fantini, 2009).

Language Introduction and Communication Skills

Early language exposure is strongly associated with the development of communication skills. Children raised in rich linguistic environments show more advanced verbal skills and cognitive flexibility (Tomasello, 2003), and both the quantity and quality of early language exposure shape later vocabulary acquisition, phonetic perception, and overall communicative competence (Kuhl, 2010). Multilingual individuals, in turn, tend to show greater adaptability in shifting between linguistic structures and cultural contexts (Bialystok, 2001) — underscoring the foundational role of early language introduction in effective human interaction.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, which positions language as a fundamental tool for cognitive development and social interaction, and in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which emphasizes meaningful interaction as the basis of language acquisition. Read together, these perspectives frame the introduction of the Erumanen language to young learners as a means of simultaneously advancing cognitive growth, social skills, linguistic competence, and cultural identity within learners' own cultural context.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the benefits of integrating the Erumanen language into early childhood education?
2. To what extent does the introduction of basic Erumanen language enhance the cultural awareness and development of young learners?
3. How does the introduction of the basic Erumanen language influence the communication skills of young learners?

Proposed Innovation, Intervention, and Strategy

The study's innovation lies in integrating the Erumanen language into early education to foster cultural awareness and linguistic diversity. As an intervention, it addresses communication gaps through structured learning materials and activities calibrated to children's cognitive levels; as a strategy, it employs interactive methods — storytelling, songs, and visual aids — to strengthen retention and engagement, again guided by the WORD mnemonic (Working, Orienting, Recalling, Describing, Sustaining).



Methods

Research Design

The study used a qualitative, multiple-case-study design (Yin, 2014), allowing an in-depth, up-close examination of the Erumanen ne Menuvu ethnolinguistic community, where advocacy for language preservation remains under-resourced and under-documented.

Participants and Sampling

Five participants took part in the study, purposively selected to represent an elder, a woman, a person with disability, a youth, and a family head — individuals with substantial background and experience in language advocacy. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to select participants able to give informed consent and speak knowledgeably to the research questions; permission was likewise sought from community leaders, who guided the study's innovation, intervention, and strategy, and participants took part cooperatively throughout.

Data Gathering

Data were collected using multiple techniques and sources, consistent with Yin's (2014) multi-case approach: interviews, focus group discussions, direct and participant observation, survey questionnaires, and document review. Interviews, conducted in written and oral form, elicited participants' ideas, opinions, and lived concerns; focus group discussions gathered community-level perspectives on issues affecting the local environment; observation supported an in-depth understanding of customary and traditional practices through direct interaction; surveys established a demographic baseline of storytellers and chanters in the community; and document review drew on relevant written works and records.

Data Analysis

Data were organized using a coding matrix to transcribe audio recordings, and analyzed following Yin's (2014) framework for developing propositions, organizing phenomena, generating themes, and examining syntheses. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data and construct theme statements for discussion.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework for trustworthiness — credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with the community, peer debriefing, and scrutiny, alongside informed consent and safeguards for anonymity; transferability was supported by rich description of context and participants; dependability was reinforced through external audit, detailed description, and careful data handling; and confirmability was established through an audit trail, triangulation, and researcher reflexivity, with original transcripts and other source materials retained throughout.

Reflexivity

The researcher's dual role as educator and social worker shaped the study's orientation toward participants. As a social worker, the researcher recognized and valued the contributions of caregivers, providers, and community leaders; as an educator, the researcher sought to create space for participants — particularly members of underserved sectors — to build skills, express their views, and access relevant programs and services on their own terms.



Results

This section presents findings across three subtopics and ten themes: language integration, language and cultural enhancement, and the influence of language introduction on young learners (see Appendix A, Tables 1–3).

Language Integration

Theme 1: Nature of the Erumanen Language

Participants described the Erumanen language as symbolic, arbitrary, creative, dynamic, contextual, multimodal, rule-governed, social, cognitive, and emotional — properties that manifest through its phonology (sound system), morphology (word structure), syntax (sentence structure), semantics (meaning), and pragmatics (communicative context), together reflecting the language's complexity and versatility. Mwakapina (2021) similarly noted that a teacher's conceptualization of learning shapes the strategies used in the classroom, and that effective teaching requires a varied repertoire of methods.

Theme 2: Early-Education Language

Participants identified several channels through which young children communicate and learn: body language, verbal language, nonverbal language (tone, pitch, volume), sign language, gestural language, pictorial language, musical language, and dramatic language (role-play and storytelling) — alongside pre-linguistic forms such as cooing, babbling, pointing, and imitation. Finders, Wilson, and Duncan (2023) reported that language-environment assessments have been widely integrated into early-childhood programming to build capacity for high-quality learning environments across diverse learners.

Theme 3: Young Learners' Language Challenges

Participants reported challenges spanning phonological awareness, vocabulary development, grammar and syntax, pronunciation, fluency, comprehension, real-time language processing, cultural and linguistic adaptation, learning disabilities (e.g., dyslexia, auditory processing disorder), and technological distraction — compounded, for some learners, by bilingualism, socio-economic constraints, and emotional or psychological factors such as anxiety and low motivation.

Patanduk, Sirande, Sampelolo, Panggua, and Siumarlata (2024) similarly identified limited attention span, mother-tongue interference, low motivation, differing learning styles, and limited exposure or resources outside the classroom as recurring challenges for young language learners.

Theme 4: Benefits of Language Integration

Participants identified integration approaches — including content and language integrated learning (CLIL), language across the curriculum (LAC), task-based learning, and project-based learning — as yielding improved proficiency, motivation, and retention; enhanced cognitive ability; cultural understanding; preparation for real-life communication; transferable skills; expanded career opportunities; greater confidence; and a stronger sense of global citizenship. Banegas (2012) likewise found that approaches integrating curricular content with second-language learning draw on sound, cross-disciplinary theoretical grounding.

Language and Cultural Enhancement



Theme 1: Extent of the Erumanen Language

Participants situated Erumanen within the broader landscape of the world's approximately 7,139 living languages, roughly 40% of which are spoken by Indigenous peoples. They noted the diversity, endangerment, and family affiliation (e.g., Austronesian) of indigenous languages, including language isolates and sign languages, and pointed to ongoing revitalization efforts through education, documentation, and community-based initiatives. Khelloul and Benmaghrouzi (2020) similarly observed that language remains central to how communities meet their needs amid globalization, and that linguistic crises can quickly become sites of broader social and political contest.

Theme 2: Enhancement of Language Users

Participants linked language proficiency to improved communication, cognitive development, career opportunity, cultural understanding, delayed cognitive decline, expanded social connection, personal growth, access to information, richer travel experience, and lifelong learning — alongside gains in critical thinking, creativity, emotional intelligence, resilience, and adaptability. Krish, Hussin, and Sivapuniam (2009) similarly documented how structured online forums, evaluated through student and teacher feedback, support community-building and language enhancement among learners.

Theme 3: Cultural Awareness Development

Participants described cultural awareness as encompassing self-awareness, cultural knowledge, empathy, perspective-taking, cross-cultural communication, adaptability, tolerance, and global-mindedness — cultivated through formal and informal education, travel, cultural exchange, language learning, media and literature, cultural events, mentorship, and self-reflection, and resulting in stronger relationships, communication, empathy, inclusivity, and global citizenship. Constantin, Vidaa, and Popescua (2015) similarly found that exposure to cultural and civilizational knowledge helps young people assimilate the moral values and standards their society upholds.

Theme 4: Young Learners' Language Development

Participants traced language development across four stages: pre-linguistic (0–12 months — cooing, babbling, imitation, and response to voices); linguistic (1–3 years — first words, vocabulary expansion, simple sentences, imitation); language expansion (4–6 years — complex sentences, vocabulary growth, grammar development, and refined listening, speaking, reading, and writing); and language refinement (7–12 years — mastery of grammar, nuanced vocabulary and idiom, and critical thinking through language-based activity) — shaped throughout by environment, parental involvement, cultural background, and individual differences. Reed and Lee (2020) similarly emphasized that adult conversation with children is a key driver of early oral-language development.

Language Introduction Influences Young Learners

Theme 1: Influence of Basic Language Introduction

Participants associated basic language skills with improved expression, comprehension, confidence, and relationships, and with a foundation for later literacy — built on phonology, vocabulary, grammar, pragmatics, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They recommended that parents and caregivers talk regularly with children, read together, encourage communication through role-play and storytelling, and use games and songs to make language learning enjoyable. Reyes (2019) similarly noted that support tools — including language-learning



systems that partly emulate a teacher's role — are among the most influential factors shaping how language is delivered to young learners.

Theme 2: Influence of Language Adaptation

Participants described language adaptation as shaping communication, cognitive ability, cultural awareness, academic performance, and social connection, while also introducing challenges — language barriers, cognitive overload, and emotional strain such as homesickness or identity confusion — that call for sustained support from educators, family, and peers. Adaptation was seen to depend on the learner's age, prior language experience, learning environment, and individual differences, and to benefit from a supportive environment, additional language support, cultural exchange, and regular progress monitoring. Ghosn (2013) similarly found that a storybook-based approach — built on stories with rich, natural, repetitive language and universal themes — serves young learners as effectively as it serves older children taught with the same materials and procedures.



Discussion

Taken together, the ten themes indicate that introducing the Erumanen language to young learners operates on three mutually reinforcing levels — structural, cultural, and developmental — that directly address the study's three research questions.

On the benefits of integration (RQ1), participants' accounts of the Erumanen language's structural properties (Theme 1) and its varied channels of transmission in early education (Theme 2) echo Bialystok's (2011) and Cummins's (2008) findings that bilingual and multilingual exposure strengthens cognitive flexibility, executive control, and literacy. The challenges participants identified (Theme 3) — phonological, grammatical, and motivational — mirror those documented by Patanduk et al. (2024) among young English-language learners, suggesting a broadly similar developmental profile that, in turn, supports the integration strategies participants favored (Theme 4), consistent with Banegas's (2012) argument that content-and-language integration draws on sound, cross-disciplinary theoretical grounding.

On cultural awareness (RQ2), participants' description of the Erumanen language's place among the world's endangered languages (Theme 1) reinforces UNESCO's (2022) rationale for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, while their account of language users' cognitive, social, and personal gains (Theme 2) is consistent with Hamidi's (2023) and Norton's (2013) view of language as constitutive of identity. The cultural-awareness competencies participants described (Theme 3) — empathy, perspective-taking, tolerance, global-mindedness — align closely with Liddicoat and Scarino's (2013) argument that language education must cultivate cultural knowledge alongside linguistic proficiency, and the developmental stages participants traced (Theme 4) situate this cultural learning within the broader arc of early-childhood language acquisition described by Kuhl (2010) and Tomasello (2003).

On communication skills (RQ3), participants' emphasis on basic language introduction as a foundation for expression, confidence, and literacy (Theme 1) supports Tomasello's (2003) claim that early, rich linguistic exposure yields more advanced verbal and cognitive skills, while their account of the challenges and supports involved in language adaptation (Theme 2) parallels Bialystok's (2001) findings on the demands — and eventual adaptive benefits — of navigating multiple linguistic and cultural systems. Read through Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory and Communicative Language Teaching, these findings suggest that the Erumanen language functions not merely as a subject of instruction but as a tool through which young learners construct meaning, relationships, and identity, affirming the study's premise that indigenous-language introduction can serve as both a linguistic and a cultural intervention.

These findings should be read in light of the study's scope. The qualitative, five-participant, single-community design privileges depth of understanding over statistical generalizability, and the findings are best understood as an in-depth account of one Erumanen ne Menuvu community's experience rather than a representative claim about indigenous-language learners more broadly.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The introduction of the Basic Erumanen language proved to be a meaningful strategy for strengthening young learners' communication skills while advancing linguistic and cultural development. Across the study's three subtopics and ten themes — language integration, language and cultural enhancement, and the influence of language introduction on young learners — the findings converge on a consistent conclusion: early, structured



exposure to Erumanen strengthens verbal and written communication, deepens appreciation for indigenous roots, and positions language as a bridge rather than a barrier to understanding and self-expression.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the study recommends that early childhood curricula more broadly incorporate indigenous-language instruction, beginning with the Erumanen language, supported by dedicated teacher training and culturally relevant learning materials. Such investment would strengthen young learners' communication skills while helping preserve the Erumanen language and culture for future generations. Future research might extend this multi-case design to additional Erumanen ne Menuvu subtribes or municipalities, or adopt a mixed-methods approach to quantify the communicative gains observed here.

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