

NIGERIA'S NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY: LEGISLATION AND ENFORCEMENT

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Abstract

Language policy plays a pivotal role in preserving cultural identity and fostering national development, especially in linguistically diverse nations such as Nigeria. In spite of the provisions of the National Policy on Education (NPE), indigenous languages remain significantly underutilized and marginalized in formal domains, including education, governance, and the media. This paper critically examines the evolution and implementation of Nigeria's language policies, identifying persistent gaps in legislative backing, teacher preparation, curriculum integration, and language documentation. Employing sociolinguistic and ecological perspectives, the study underscores the limitations of symbolic policy formulations that lack practical enforcement mechanisms. Particular attention is given to the 2022 policy revision, assessing its potential to promote linguistic equity. The paper offers concrete recommendations, including enforceable legal frameworks, robust teacher education programs, inclusive curriculum design, and comprehensive documentation of indigenous languages. It argues that sustainable revitalization of Nigeria's linguistic heritage requires systemic and coordinated efforts across educational, political, and sociocultural spheres.

Keywords: Language policy, Indigenous languages, Multilingual education, Language revitalization, Language documentation

Introduction

Nigeria is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world, home to over 500 indigenous languages spoken across its regions. These languages embody cultural identity, social history, and traditional knowledge. However, since the colonial era, the dominance of English has persisted, largely due to its status as the language of administration, education, and upward mobility. As a result, indigenous languages have become increasingly marginalized, particularly in formal domains.

The National Policy on Education (NPE), first introduced in 1977 and revised multiple times, recognizes the importance of mother-tongue instruction in early education. Yet, despite this symbolic acknowledgment, implementation has remained weak. Schools across Nigeria overwhelmingly adopt English as the medium of instruction, while indigenous languages are often sidelined or taught only as optional subjects. The people who are expected to own the Policy suddenly develop cold feet to it. They faithfully and politically venerate the English language for the obvious economic and social status advantages while the English language continues to gain a geometric acceptability increase in International Communities (Proshina, 2019). This trend persists despite evidence that early literacy and cognitive development are best supported through the learner's first language (UNESCO, 2022).

The problem lies not only in symbolic policy documents but in the absence of legislative enforcement, funding, and structural support. Policies often advocate for the inclusion of local languages but fail to address systemic barriers such as the shortage of qualified teachers, lack of

instructional materials, and underdeveloped orthographies for many indigenous languages. These issues are exacerbated by a lack of legal instruments that mandate the use of indigenous languages in education and governance, unlike in countries such as South Africa or India.

In light of the 2022 revision of the NPE, there is renewed discourse on revitalizing indigenous languages. However, without addressing the longstanding challenges of implementation, enforcement, and infrastructure, the policy may again remain aspirational. This paper evaluates the effectiveness of Nigeria's language policy from a socio-political and educational standpoint. It draws on sociolinguistic and ecological language theories to contextualize the failure of past policies and propose a roadmap for actionable reform that ensures the survival and utility of Nigeria's indigenous languages.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two intersecting theoretical approaches: Sociolinguistic Theory and the Language Ecology Framework.

Sociolinguistic Theory provides insight into how language use both reflects and reinforces social hierarchies. According to Fishman (2006), language is not merely a tool for communication but a repository of collective identity and power relations. In multilingual societies like Nigeria, sociolinguistics reveals how language policy decisions often mirror societal attitudes towards class, ethnicity, and perceived prestige. Nigerian scholars such as Bamgbose (1991) and Adebija (2004) have repeatedly emphasized that language policies in Nigeria tend to privilege English, thereby systematically diminishing the functional value of indigenous languages.

The Language Ecology Framework, originally articulated by Haugen (1972) and further developed by Mufwene (2020), regards languages as part of an interdependent sociocultural and educational ecosystem. In this framework, the survival and growth of a language depend not only on the number of its speakers but also on institutional support, functional use in formal domains, and documentation. In Nigeria, many indigenous languages suffer from what Bamgbose (2000) termed "implementation failure"—where policy intent is strong but operationalization is weak or nonexistent.

Together, these theories support the analysis of why Nigeria's language policy continues to struggle with implementation and legitimacy. They also offer a lens through which the persistent marginalization of indigenous languages despite policy provisions can be better understood and addressed.

Nigeria's Language Planning

Since independence, Nigeria has experimented with various language policies to promote national unity and functional multilingualism. The most prominent is the National Policy on Education (NPE), first enacted in 1977 revised in 1981, 2004, 2013, and 2022. The policy mandates the use of the child's mother tongue or language of the immediate community for early childhood education (FRN, 2022). However, the dominance of English remains at all levels of instruction, especially from primary four upward. One key criticism of these policies is their symbolic nature; beautifully written but poorly executed, in line with Bamgbose's (1991) description as "well-crafted documents with little effect on actual classroom practice." In the same vein, Olagunju (2022) asserted that these policies often lack legal force, leaving implementation to the discretion of local authorities who treat them as guidelines rather than enforceable mandates.

The 2022 revision of the NPE restated the importance of indigenous languages but failed to provide enforcement mechanisms or clearly assign implementation responsibilities for resource allocation, or teacher development (Oladejo, 2023). For instance, the policy does not provide clear structures for evaluating compliance nor does it identify key stakeholders responsible for implementation at state and local government levels. This leaves the policy vulnerable to neglect.

The language policy has also struggled with political will and a lack of coordinated federal-state educational governance. According to Oladejo (2023), the decentralization of education in Nigeria without a strong national monitoring framework has meant that states interpret and implement the NPE differently—some supporting mother tongue instruction, others ignoring it altogether.

Furthermore, the focus on three "major" languages—Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo—in national policy has inadvertently marginalized minority languages, many of which are endangered or undocumented. Emenanjo (2021) warned that this tiered linguistic preference replicates colonial hierarchies and overlooks the functional reality of multilingualism at the local level.

Implementation Challenges and Systemic Barriers

In spite of the clear intentions embedded in Nigeria's language policy documents, implementation remains the most persistent and significant challenge. The root of this failure lies not only in administrative inefficiencies but also in what Bamgbose (2000) termed the "implementation gap"—the disconnection between policy formulation and actual practice.

One major barrier is the absence of statutory enforcement mechanisms. Although the National Policy on Education (NPE) recommends mother-tongue instruction in the first three years of schooling, there is no legislative mandate requiring schools to comply. Consequently, implementation is largely dependent on the goodwill and capacity of individual school administrators and local education authorities (Ojo, 2023). The policy lacks binding legal instruments that could ensure accountability, monitor compliance, or penalize non-adherence.

Additionally, English is perceived as a language of social mobility and global relevance, especially in urban centres (Adeyanju, 2019). Many parents prefer English-medium instruction, believing it equips their children with better economic prospects. The benefits of mother-tongue education, including enhanced cognitive development and foundational literacy, are often overlooked (UNESCO, 2022).

Infrastructural limitations compound these issues. Teaching and learning materials in indigenous languages are scarce or outdated. Many minority languages lack standardised orthographies, making instructional development difficult (Egbokhare, 2023).

Teacher Training and Curriculum Reform

Effective policy implementation depends significantly on teacher competence. However, most Nigerian teacher education programmes do not prepare teachers to instruct in indigenous languages (Akindele, 2023). As a result, teachers frequently revert to English, even in early grades. Yusuf (2021) attributed this gap to the colonial legacy in Nigeria's education system, which privileged Western knowledge systems and neglected indigenous linguistic heritage. The curriculum for teacher education rarely includes courses in indigenous language pedagogy, phonological systems, or translation techniques.

Moreover, there is a systemic undervaluing of teachers who specialize in Nigerian languages.

These teachers are often underpaid, undertrained, and excluded from policy consultations (Olateju, 2022). This discourages prospective educators from pursuing careers in indigenous language instruction (Olateju, 2022). Without targeted investment in professional development and recognition for these educators, language policy will continue to falter.

The issue is compounded by a curriculum that heavily favours English and foreign languages. Indigenous languages are often elective rather than core subjects (Ajayi, 2023). This structure not only limits exposure to these languages but reinforces their perception as inferior or non-essential (Ajayi, 2023). Therefore, genuine reform must go beyond curriculum revision to include:

- Mandatory inclusion of indigenous languages as mediums of instruction, not just examinable subjects.
- Incorporation of local content and storytelling traditions into classroom materials.
- Development of multilingual learning models, particularly in regions where more than one indigenous language is spoken.

Documentation and Digitization of Indigenous Languages

A critical but underdeveloped component of language policy implementation is the documentation and digitisation of indigenous languages. Language documentation is vital for preservation, curriculum development, digital inclusion, and intergenerational transmission (Egbokhare, 2023). Many Nigerian languages are unwritten or lack grammar guides, dictionaries, or textbooks. For example, local languages like Izon, Birom, or Ibariba, though widely spoken, lack the linguistic infrastructure needed for academic use (Ogunmodede, 2022). This lack of documentation hinders integration into formal education and public service use.

In the digital era, languages without an online presence are at greater risk of extinction. Most Nigerian languages are absent from Wikipedia, translation tools, and media platforms, making them invisible to young, digitally connected users (Bamgbose, 2011).

Successful documentation requires multi-stakeholder involvement — including linguists, local communities, educational institutions, and government agencies. Projects like the Yorùbá Language Corpus Project (Adewole, 2020) demonstrate the potential of collaborative documentation. However, without state funding and policy integration, such efforts remain fragmented and unsustainable. To safeguard linguistic diversity and make language policy actionable, Nigeria must invest in large-scale language documentation and digitization projects that prioritize under-resourced and endangered languages.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Nigeria stands at a critical juncture in its linguistic history. While its language policy frameworks symbolically support multilingualism and the preservation of indigenous languages, the continued marginalization of these languages reveals a deep disconnect between policy intent and implementation reality. The persistence of English as the default language of instruction, governance, and social mobility has relegated indigenous languages to informal and often diminishing roles. This paper has shown that the challenges facing indigenous languages in Nigeria are not due to lack of policy but rather the absence of enforceable legislation, insufficient teacher preparation, curriculum neglect, and a failure to invest in large-scale documentation and digitization. Without structural change and political will, the current policy landscape will continue to be ineffective — a “beautiful document,” as Bamgbose (1991) aptly described, that lacks any

real impact. If Nigeria is to reverse the trend of linguistic erosion and educational inequality, it must transition from rhetorical support for multilingualism to practical, enforceable action. This includes legislating indigenous language use in education, reforming teacher training institutions, embedding local languages into curricular design, and digitizing linguistic resources to secure their presence in the digital era. Language is not merely a tool of communication; it is a vessel of identity, worldview, and national heritage. The time for symbolic gestures is past. A bold, legally binding, and culturally responsive language policy — backed by funding, education reform, and community involvement — is urgently required to secure the future of Nigeria’s indigenous languages.

In light of the challenges highlighted and the conclusion drawn, the following recommendations are proposed to make Nigeria’s language policy functional, inclusive, and enforceable:

- The Nigerian National Assembly should pass a Language Education Act mandating the use of indigenous languages as the medium of instruction at the early stages of education. The act should include provisions for monitoring, compliance mechanisms, and penalties for violations, similar to what exists for compulsory basic education.
- Colleges of education and universities should revise their curricula to include indigenous language pedagogy, multilingual instructional techniques, and phonology. Government should sponsor scholarships for students who pursue degrees in Nigerian languages and offer incentives such as higher remuneration and career progression pathways for language teachers.
- National and state curricula should be overhauled to integrate indigenous knowledge systems, proverbs, storytelling, and local content. Indigenous languages should not be taught as mere subjects but used as tools for learning across disciplines in the early grades, especially in rural areas.
- A National Language Documentation Fund should be established to support linguists, educators, and cultural organizations in documenting Nigeria’s languages. These efforts should be archived in both physical repositories and digital platforms for future access and integration.
- The National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) should enforce quotas for indigenous language programming on radio and television. Tech developers should be incentivised to include Nigerian languages in apps, media, and educational content. This would ensure that digital spaces are more linguistically inclusive.
- Public awareness drives should be launched to counter negative attitudes toward indigenous languages and promote the value of indigenous languages, engaging traditional rulers, religious leaders, and local influencers.

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