

The Introduction of a New National Language Policy in Nigeria: Implications for Language Planning and Language Learning

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Abstract

This paper examines the introduction and implications of Nigeria's National Language Policy, with a focus on the 2022 policy approved under the President Muhammadu Buhari administration as it affects language planning and learning in Nigeria. It examines the conception of language, highlighting its role in communication, identity, and education. The development of Nigeria's language policy, rooted in the National Policy on Education (NPE) since 1977, is analysed alongside its implementation challenges, including inadequate resources, poor teacher training, and inconsistencies in enforcement. The 2022 policy, emphasizing mother tongue instruction through primary education, is evaluated for its prospects and challenges, such as linguistic diversity and parental preferences for English. The implications of the policy for language planning and learning are discussed, emphasizing the need for robust implementation strategies to enhance multilingual education and cultural preservation. Recommendations made include increased funding, teacher capacity building, and development of indigenous language resources among others.

Keywords: New National Policy, language planning, language acquisition, Nigeria, Policy on language

Introduction

Language serves as the cornerstone of communication, cultural identity, and educational

development in multilingual societies like Nigeria. With over 500 languages spoken across its diverse ethnic groups, Nigeria's linguistic landscape presents unique challenges and opportunities for language policy and planning (Bamgbose, 1991). The National Policy on Education (NPE), first introduced in 1977, has guided language policy in Nigeria, aiming to balance the use of indigenous languages with English as a unifying and global language. The 2022 National Language Policy, approved under the Buhari administration, marks a significant shift by mandating mother tongue (MT) or language of the immediate community (LIC) as the medium of instruction from early childhood through Primary 6 (Sanusi, 2024). This paper explores the conception of language, traces the evolution of Nigeria's language policy, evaluates its implementation, and analyses the implications of the 2022 policy for language planning and learning.

Language has been viewed as a system of symbols used for communication, encompassing phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics (Ibekwe, 2006). Saussure (1916), emphasized language as a structured system of signs, while Spolsky (2012), highlight its role in social organization, identity formation, and cultural transmission. In Nigeria's multilingual context, language serves as a tool for intercultural communication and a marker of ethnic identity, with each group valuing its linguistic heritage (Acheoah & Olaleye, 2019).

Development of Language Policy in Nigeria

Nigeria's language policy has evolved through colonial and post-independence eras. During British colonial rule, English was imposed as the language of administration and education, marginalizing indigenous languages (Adeniyi & Ayodele, 2024). After independence of the nation, the 1977 National Policy on Education sought to promote multilingual education by mandating the use of the mother tongue or LIC in early primary education, transitioning to English by Primary 4 (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1977). Subsequent revisions in 1981, 1999, and 2004 reinforced this framework, adding provisions for learning major Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) at the secondary level (Emenanjo, 1996).

Approved in 2022, the new national language policy extends mother tongue instruction to Primary 6, with English Language taught as a subject during this period (Sanusi, 2024). It also mandates French as a compulsory subject from Primary 4 and encourages bilingualism at the tertiary level. This policy aims to enhance foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) skills, address Nigeria's learning crisis, and promote cultural identity (NERDC, 2021).

The evolution of Nigeria's language policy reflects the country's complex sociolinguistic landscape, shaped by its colonial history, ethnic diversity, and post-independence aspirations for national unity and development. With over 500 languages spoken across more than 250 ethnic groups, Nigeria's language policy has sought to balance the promotion of indigenous languages with the use of English as a unifying and global medium (Bamgbose, 1991). This section traces the development of language policy in Nigeria, from pre-colonial and colonial periods to the contemporary framework, culminating in the 2022 National Language Policy under the Buhari administration.

Pre-Colonial and Colonial Foundations

In pre-colonial Nigeria, language use was predominantly oral and tied to ethnic identity, with each community using its mother tongue for

communication, education, and cultural practices (Adeniyi & Ayodele, 2024). Major languages like Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba served as regional lingua francas, facilitating trade and inter-ethnic interactions. The arrival of British colonial rule in the 19th century introduced English as the language of administration, education, and missionary activities, marginalizing indigenous languages (Emenanjo, 1996). Colonial education policies prioritized English, as it was seen as a tool for governance and Christian evangelization, with limited efforts to develop orthographies for local languages, primarily through missionary work (Ibekwe, 2006).

The colonial period laid the groundwork for a linguistic hierarchy, where English became associated with prestige and access to opportunities, while indigenous languages were relegated to informal domains. This created a legacy of linguistic inequality that post-independence policies sought to address. However, the colonial emphasis on English also entrenched its role as a unifying language in a linguistically diverse region, setting the stage for its continued dominance (Owojecho, 2020).

Post-Independence and the National Policy on Education (1977)

Following Nigeria's independence in 1960, the need for a cohesive national identity prompted the development of a language policy that would accommodate the country's multilingualism while fostering unity. The National Policy on Education (NPE), first introduced in 1977, marked a pivotal moment in formalizing language policy in education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1977). The 1977 NPE outlined a multilingual approach, stipulating that:

- i. the mother tongue (MT) or language of the immediate community (LIC) should be the medium of instruction in early primary education (Primary 1–3);
- ii. English should be introduced as a subject in early primary years and become the medium of instruction from Primary 4 onward; and

- iii. one of the three major Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo, or Yoruba) should be taught as a subject in secondary schools to promote national cohesion.

This policy aimed at leveraging the cognitive benefits of mother tongue instruction in early education, as supported by global research on bilingual education (Spolsky, 2012), while ensuring proficiency in English for national and international communication. The inclusion of major Nigerian languages in secondary education was intended to foster cross-cultural understanding among Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups (Emenanjo, 1996).

Revisions to the NPE (1981–2004)

Subsequent revisions to the NPE in 1981, 1999, and 2004 refined the language policy to address implementation challenges and evolving educational needs. The 1981 revision emphasized the development of orthographies and teaching materials for indigenous languages, recognizing the logistical barriers to mother tongue instruction (Bamgbose, 1991). The 1999 NPE introduced French as a compulsory subject in junior secondary schools, reflecting Nigeria's geopolitical interests in Francophone West Africa (NERDC, 2021). The 2004 revision further clarified the transition from mother tongue to English instruction, aiming for a smoother linguistic shift to improve learning outcomes (Ibrahim & Gwandu, 2016).

Despite these revisions, the policy's implementation faced significant hurdles. Studies indicate that lack of trained teachers, insufficient teaching materials, and regional disparities in policy enforcement undermined the effectiveness of the mother tongue instruction policy (Owojecho, 2020). In urban areas and private schools, English often dominated from the outset, driven by parental preferences and the perceived economic value of English proficiency (Sanusi, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Spolsky's (2012) language policy framework, which emphasizes three components:

language practices, beliefs, and management. Language practices reflect actual usage in classrooms, influenced by teachers' and parents' preferences. Language beliefs, such as the perception of English as a gateway to global opportunities, shape policy acceptance. Language management involves government efforts to enforce policies through resources and training. This framework guides the analysis of the 2022 policy's implications for planning and acquisition, considering Nigeria's sociolinguistic diversity and educational challenges.

The 2022 National Language Policy

The most significant development in Nigeria's language policy came with the approval of the 2022 National Language Policy under the Buhari administration. Announced on November 30, 2022, this policy extended the use of the mother tongue or LIC as the medium of instruction from early childhood education through Primary 6, with English taught as a subject during this period (Sanusi, 2024). The key features of the 2022 policy include:

- i. **Extended Mother Tongue Instruction:** Unlike previous policies, which transitioned to English by Primary 4, the 2022 policy mandates mother tongue instruction up to Primary 6 to enhance foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) skills.
- ii. **Compulsory French:** French is introduced as a compulsory subject from Primary 4, aligning with Nigeria's role in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).
- iii. **Bilingualism at Tertiary Level:** The policy encourages bilingual education in tertiary institutions, promoting proficiency in both English and indigenous languages (NERDC, 2021).

The 2022 policy was informed by evidence from global studies, such as UNESCO's advocacy for mother tongue-based education, which demonstrates improved cognitive development and academic performance when students learn in their first

language (Spolsky, 2012). The policy also responds to Nigeria's learning crisis, with data showing that 75% of 10-year-olds struggle with basic reading and arithmetic (UNICEF, 2022). By prioritizing indigenous languages, the policy aims to address these educational gaps while preserving Nigeria's linguistic heritage.

The 2022 policy emerged in the context of growing advocacy for decolonizing education and promoting cultural identity. Scholars like Acheoah and Olaleye (2019) argue that Nigeria's linguistic diversity is a national asset that should be leveraged for educational and cultural purposes. The policy also aligns with the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme, which seeks to improve access to quality education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). Additionally, the Buhari administration's emphasis on national pride and self-reliance influenced the policy's focus on indigenous languages as tools for cultural preservation and national cohesion (Sanusi, 2024).

However, the policy's adoption was not without controversy. Stakeholders, including educators and parents expressed concerns about its feasibility given Nigeria's linguistic diversity and resource constraints (Adeniyi & Ayodele, 2024). The policy's ambitious scope, particularly the extension of mother tongue instruction to Primary 6, requires significant investment in teacher training, curriculum development, and material production, which previous policies struggled to achieve (Ibrahim & Gwandu, 2016).

The development of Nigeria's language policy reflects a journey from colonial imposition of English to a multilingual framework that seeks to balance indigenous languages with global communication needs. The 1977 NPE laid the foundation for mother tongue instruction, with subsequent revisions addressing implementation gaps and expanding linguistic inclusivity. The 2022 policy represents a bold step toward prioritizing indigenous languages in education, driven by evidence of their cognitive and cultural benefits.

However, its success depends on overcoming historical challenges, such as resource scarcity and societal biases toward English, to ensure effective language planning and acquisition in Nigeria's diverse linguistic landscape.

Challenges and Implications on Language Planning and Learning

The implementation of this new policy faces several challenges that have profound implications for language planning (the deliberate effort to influence language use and structure) and language learning (the process of learning languages). This section discusses these challenges, as identified in the literature, and analyses their impact on language planning and learning in Nigeria's diverse linguistic context.

Linguistic diversity of the nation is a major challenge. Nigeria's over 500 languages, with varying dialects and orthographies, pose a logistical challenge for implementing a uniform mother tongue policy (Bamgbose, 1991). Many minority languages lack standardized writing systems, grammars, or teaching materials, complicating their use in formal education (NERDC, 2021). This diversity has implication for both planning and learning of these languages. The sheer number of languages requires extensive resources to develop curricula, textbooks, and assessment tools for each language or dialect. Language planning is hindered by the absence of orthographies for many minority languages, limiting their integration into educational systems. Policymakers must prioritize which languages to standardize, risking the marginalization of smaller linguistic communities (Adeniyi & Ayodele, 2024). Students speaking minority languages may be taught in a related but unfamiliar language (e.g., a dominant language), leading to comprehension difficulties and reduced learning outcomes. This can impede early literacy and numeracy skills, as students struggle to engage with content in an unfamiliar medium (Ibekwe, 2006). The policy's focus on major languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) may further place

minority language speakers at a disadvantage, potentially leading to language shift or loss.

Another challenge is teacher capacity and training. Many teachers lack proficiency in the mother tongue or LIC of their students, particularly in urban or ethnically mixed areas where teachers may not share the local language with students (Owojecho, 2020). Additionally, teacher training programmes often do not emphasize multilingual pedagogy or the use of indigenous languages in instruction (Ibrahim & Gwandu, 2016). Effective language planning requires a robust teacher training framework to ensure educators are well equipped to teach in local languages. The lack of trained teachers necessitates significant investment in professional development, including pre-service and in-service training programmes tailored to addressing Nigeria's linguistic diversity (Sanusi, 2024). Without this, the policy risks inconsistent implementation across regions. Teachers' inability to teach effectively in the mother tongue can lead to poor instructional quality, undermining students' ability to acquire foundational literacy skills. This is particularly critical in early education, where mother tongue instruction is proven to enhance cognitive development (Spolsky, 2012). Students may also develop negative attitude toward their native languages if instruction is poorly delivered, favouring English instead.

Lack of teaching materials, such as textbooks, dictionaries, and digital resources in indigenous languages presents a major barrier to implementing the 2022 policy (NERDC, 2021). Many languages, especially minority ones, lack standardized orthographies or sufficient literature for classroom use (Bamgbose, 1991). Language planning involves creating and disseminating resources to support language use in education. The absence of materials requires significant investment in linguistic research, publishing, and distribution, which is challenging given Nigeria's budgetary constraints (Sanusi, 2024). Prioritizing resource development for major languages may further marginalize minority languages, complicating equitable language planning. Without adequate materials, students and

teachers rely on improvised or English-based resources, which can hinder comprehension and engagement. This affects language acquisition by limiting exposure to structured, age-appropriate content in the mother tongue, potentially leading to lower literacy rates and academic underperformance (UNICEF, 2022).

Parental and Societal Attitudes remain a major challenge in the implementation of the 2022 policy on language. Many parents, particularly in the urban areas, prefer English as the medium of instruction due to its perceived economic and social benefits (Sanusi, 2024). This preference is reinforced by the dominance of English in higher education, employment, and global communication, leading to resistance against mother tongue instruction (Owojecho, 2020). Societal attitude influences language policy acceptance and implementation. Language planning must include public awareness campaigns to highlight the cognitive and cultural benefits of mother tongue education (Acheoah & Olaleye, 2019). Without addressing these attitudes, the policy may face resistance, particularly in private schools where parents have greater influence. Parental preference for English can lead to limited exposure to indigenous languages at home and school, hindering students' proficiency in their mother tongue. This creates a linguistic gap, where students may struggle to transition to English instruction in later years while lacking fluency in their native language, impacting both academic performance and cultural identity (Ibekwe, 2006).

Conclusion

The development of Nigeria's language policy reflects a journey from colonial imposition of English to a multilingual framework in the post-colonial that seeks to balance indigenous languages with global communication needs. The 1977 NPE laid the foundation for mother tongue instruction, with subsequent revisions addressing implementation gaps and expanding linguistic inclusivity. The 2022 policy represents a bold step toward prioritizing indigenous languages in

education, driven by evidence of their cognitive and cultural benefits. While the policy holds promise for improving literacy and preserving cultural heritage, its success hinges on overcoming longstanding challenges such as resource scarcity, teacher training deficits, and societal biases toward English. Effective language planning requires investment in educational resources and orthographies, while language learning can be enhanced through consistent mother tongue instruction. Policymakers must prioritize stakeholders engagement, adequate funding, and effective monitoring mechanisms to ensure the 2022 National Language Policy achieves its objectives. The paper recommends an increase in funding for resources, expanded training schedules for language teachers, public awareness and establishment of robust monitoring and evaluation schemes.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations targeted at addressing these challenges:

- i. Linguistic Documentation: Government should invest in developing orthographies and teaching materials for minority languages, with support from linguistic research institutions like the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) and other such agencies and associations.
- ii. Pre-service and in-service training programmes should be expanded to equip language teachers with multilingual pedagogy and proficiency in local languages.
- iii. Government should make funding available for producing textbooks, digital resources, and assessments in indigenous languages, both major and minority languages..
- iv. Campaigns should be launched to educate parents and communities about the benefits of mother tongue education for cognitive development and cultural preservation.
- v. Robust Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure consistent implementation across regions, with state governments adapting the policy to local contexts should be put in place.

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