

THE CONTRADICTION IN NIGERIAN LANGUAGE POLICY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR PROMOTING MINOR LANGUAGES

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Abstract

Nigeria's multilingual character presents both opportunities and challenges for educational policy. This paper critically examines Nigeria's National Policy on Education (NPE) and the New National Language Policy (2022) in relation to mother tongue instruction, the elevation of French as the second official language, and the marginalisation of minority languages. Despite progressive aims, implementation has been constrained by inadequate planning, teacher shortages, and ideological contradictions rooted in colonial legacies. The paper argues that while French serves strategic regional integration goals, its institutional privileging underscores imbalances in resource allocation and policy attention. Recommendations include orthography development, teacher training, curriculum adaptation, community engagement, policy reforms, and equitable resource allocation to support Nigeria's rich linguistic diversity and enhance educational outcomes.

Keywords: Language policy, Nigeria, mother tongue education, French language, minority languages, education policy

Introduction

Language-in-education policy is a central concern for nations seeking to balance cultural preservation, social inclusion, and global competitiveness. In Nigeria, one of the world's most linguistically diverse countries with over 500 languages, these issues are especially pressing. Education policy serves as a key arena where tensions between national unity, cultural heritage, and international engagement are negotiated.

The Nigerian government has long recognised the importance of language policy in fostering national development. The National Policy on Education (NPE) (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013) and the New National Language Policy (2022) represent attempts to align education with the country's complex multilingual reality.

Both policies emphasise mother tongue instruction in early education while maintaining English as the primary medium beyond primary school. Notably, French is designated as Nigeria's second official language to promote regional cooperation and integration.

This paper provides a critical analysis of these policy frameworks. It explores their provisions and goals, the ideological tensions inherent in privileging exogenous languages such as English and French, and their practical shortcomings—especially the marginalisation of Nigeria's minority languages. The paper also offers concrete, evidence-based strategies for promoting minority languages in the education system, thus contributing to the on-going discourse on sustainable multilingual education in Africa.

Nigeria's Linguistic Landscape

Nigeria is often described as one of the most linguistically diverse countries globally, with estimates suggesting over 500 distinct languages (Adegbija, 2004). While this diversity represents a rich cultural heritage, it also poses significant challenges for educational planning and national integration. Historically, colonial language policies privileged English as the medium of administration, education, and interethnic communication. Post-independence governments have grappled with the task of balancing the demands of national unity, global participation, and cultural preservation.

Colonial Legacy and Language Hierarchies

The dominance of English in Nigeria's education system is a direct legacy of colonial rule. It remains the official language of administration, commerce, and education beyond the early years of schooling. Similarly, the adoption of French as a second official language reflects geopolitical considerations arising from Nigeria's location within a Francophone-dominated region and its role in ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States). This privileging of exogenous languages has implications for indigenous languages, particularly minority ones, which often lack institutional support and risk erosion.

The National Policy on Education (2013): Language Provisions

The National Policy on Education (6th Edition, 2013) remains the key reference for Nigeria's education planning. Its language provisions demonstrate an attempt to balance multiple, sometimes competing, objectives. The NPE states that the medium of instruction in the first three years of primary education shall be the

child's mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment. During this period, English is taught as a subject. From the fourth year onwards, English becomes the primary medium of instruction (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). This approach is grounded in research indicating that children learn best in their first language. Early literacy in the mother tongue promotes cognitive development, improves academic outcomes, and fosters cultural identity (UNESCO, 2021). The policy further encourages the teaching of one of the three major Nigerian languages, Hausa, Igbo, or Yoruba other than the learner's own, to promote national integration and cross-cultural understanding. This provision recognises the need for shared linguistic bridges in a multi-ethnic country.

A distinctive feature of the NPE is its explicit designation of French as Nigeria's second official language. The policy states that French shall be the second official language in Nigeria and it shall be compulsory in schools (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013, p. 10). This provision reflects Nigeria's strategic commitment to regional cooperation, given its borders with several Francophone countries and its active role in ECOWAS.

The New National Language Policy (2022)

In December 2022, the Federal Ministry of Education announced a new policy mandating mother tongue instruction for the first six years of primary education, extending the earlier provision of three years. The policy states, "It is our desire that Nigerian children will learn in their mother tongue from primary one to six, while English will be taught as a subject" (Federal Ministry of Education, 2022). The Ministry pledged to develop orthographies for languages lacking standard writing systems, produce teaching materials in local languages, and train teachers for effective mother tongue instruction.

The Position of French in Nigeria's New Language Policy

French occupies a unique, strategic position in Nigeria's education system. Its designation as the second official language is justified by geopolitical and economic considerations. For instance, Nigeria is bordered by Francophone countries such as Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. French proficiency is viewed as essential for ECOWAS integration, trade, diplomacy, and regional security. Nigeria's leadership ambitions in West Africa require functional bilingualism in English and French.

As a result, French is systematically integrated into the national curriculum, with dedicated support for teacher training, textbook production, and assessment systems. This institutional investment underscores the prioritisation of French in national policy, even as many indigenous languages struggle for basic recognition and resources.

Critical Analysis of Policy Shortcomings

Despite the progressive intentions behind the NPE and the New National Language Policy, several critical shortcomings persist, particularly regarding their practical implementation and their implications for Nigeria's linguistic minorities.

The simultaneous promotion of mother tongue education and the privileging of English and French embody an unresolved ideological contradiction. While policy rhetoric celebrates cultural preservation and social inclusion through local languages, practical and institutional support overwhelmingly favours exogenous languages. English remains the dominant language of instruction beyond primary school, and French receives significant state investment despite being entirely foreign. This hierarchy of languages reproduces colonial-era

valuations of linguistic prestige and modernity (Bamgbose, 2019).

Historically, Nigeria has struggled to implement even its existing three-year mother tongue provision. Common barriers include:

- Lack of trained teachers fluent in local languages.
- Absence of standardised orthographies and teaching materials.
- Weak institutional coordination across states and local governments.
- Limited political will and inconsistent funding (Ajibola & Alabi, 2021).

Extending mother tongue instruction to six years under the new policy magnifies these challenges. Without a robust, well-resourced implementation plan, the policy risks remaining a rhetorical gesture rather than a transformative reform.

The Role of French Language and its Strategic Necessity

Nigeria's promotion of French as its second official language is justified by geopolitical imperatives. Proficiency in French facilitates trade, security cooperation, and diplomacy within the Francophone-dominated ECOWAS region. However, this strategic necessity poses policy challenges:

- i. Prioritising French may divert resources from indigenous language development.
- ii. Institutionalising a foreign language as "second official" reinforces linguistic hierarchies rooted in colonial history.
- iii. It may undermine efforts to promote equitable multilingualism within Nigeria.
- iv. A balanced policy must acknowledge these strategic needs while ensuring they do not come at the expense of Nigeria's cultural and linguistic heritage.

Educational Initiatives Strategies for Promoting Minor Languages

Promoting minority languages in Nigeria requires a holistic approach that brings together government action, educational reform, community participation, and digital innovation. The strategies outlined under four major level here offer a comprehensive framework for revitalizing indigenous languages and ensuring their continued relevance in education and society.

Government and Policy Level

At the government and policy level, deliberate legal, institutional, and international frameworks are essential for sustaining minority languages. The enactment of language rights legislation provides a strong foundation for preservation. Models such as New Zealand's Māori Language Act (2016) and Finland's Language Act (2003) demonstrate how official recognition can give minority languages equal standing in education, administration, and public services. Nigeria can draw from such examples by drafting and implementing laws that explicitly guarantee minority language use in schools, media, and local governance. Beyond legislation, sustainable funding remains central. Without clear budgetary allocations, policies remain rhetorical. Federal and state governments must dedicate funds to orthography development, production of teaching materials, teacher training, and community driven literacy projects. Transparent financial reporting would build accountability and ensure that resources reach the intended beneficiaries. International cooperation also strengthens government strategy. Organizations such as UNESCO and the Endangered Languages Project have provided technical support, digital platforms, and advocacy frameworks for endangered languages

across the world. Nigeria can benefit from such global partnerships by engaging in joint research, cultural exchanges, and funding collaborations that expand the reach of its minority language promotion efforts. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should complement these measures. Independent bodies can be established to oversee the implementation of language in education policies, ensuring that mother tongue instruction, bilingual education, and resource allocation are carried out as stipulated. This would prevent policy stagnation and provide reliable data to guide reforms.

Education System Level

At the education system level, teacher training stands at the core of effective language promotion. Teachers must be equipped not only with proficiency in minority languages but also with pedagogical skills for multilingual classrooms. Training programs should integrate culturally responsive methods, oral traditions, and interactive learning strategies to foster confidence in teaching through mother tongues. Orthography development and the creation of culturally relevant learning materials must also be prioritized. Dictionaries, primers, grammar books, and story collections produced in collaboration with universities and communities will provide essential tools for instruction. Language documentation further ensures that minority languages are preserved for future generations. Institutions such as the Center for Nigerian Languages at Bayero University, Kano, have demonstrated the value of producing texts in Kanuri, Nupe, and other languages, a model that can be extended nationwide. Curriculum adaptation is equally significant. By embedding local folktales, proverbs, and oral history into school syllabi, children learn not only linguistic structures but also the cultural heritage encoded in their languages. Bilingual and

immersion programs also represent a powerful educational strategy. Drawing from the Welsh Government's Cymraeg 2050 plan and Indigenous language immersion models in Canada, Nigerian schools can implement approaches where minority languages serve as the medium of instruction for extended periods, alongside English. Such immersion supports fluency, cognitive development, and a strong sense of identity among learners.

Community Level

At the community level, cultural pride and intergenerational transmission remain crucial. Cultural festivals provide public spaces for celebrating and revitalizing languages. The National Festival of Arts and Culture (NAFEST) already promote Nigeria's diversity, but greater emphasis on minority languages would give them visibility and prestige. International Mother Language Day, celebrated globally on February 21, also offers a symbolic platform. Local communities can mark the day with storytelling sessions, drama performances, poetry competitions, and workshops in their mother tongues, reinforcing awareness of linguistic rights and values. The deliberate promotion of home language use forms another foundation of sustainability. When families use their indigenous languages consistently at home for communication, songs, proverbs, and prayers, children acquire fluency naturally. Such practices affirm identity and prevent the gradual erosion that comes from replacing local tongues with dominant languages. Family and community meetings also serve as informal schools. Through communal storytelling, elders' advice, and peer interaction, children and youth learn to use their language in authentic contexts, strengthening both social bonds and cultural continuity. Language clubs and workshops further encourage active participation. Informal platforms in

schools, community centers, or youth associations allow learners to practice speaking in relaxed environments, building confidence and competence. Collaboration with local organizations, particularly NGOs, enriches community level strategies. NGOs often bring expertise in literacy development, resource mobilization, and advocacy. Partnering with cultural organizations and community leaders can produce initiatives such as adult literacy classes, outreach programs, and intergenerational mentorship, all of which sustain language use beyond classrooms.

Digital and Media Level

At the digital and media level, modern technologies offer unprecedented opportunities to revitalize minority languages. Online learning platforms can provide structured courses, interactive content, and digital libraries accessible to diverse age groups. Platforms such as Duolingo and Memorize have demonstrated that endangered languages can be revived through gamified and accessible tools. Nigerian developers, universities, and cultural groups can design similar platforms for indigenous languages. Broadcasting and media engagement are equally vital. Radio Nigeria already transmits in several major languages, but community radio and local television can further promote minority languages through news, dramas, music, and educational programs. Digital broadcasting ensures that even younger generations encounter their mother tongues in modern contexts. Mobile applications enhance this approach, offering games, pronunciation guides, and culturally tailored stories that make language learning fun and interactive. The Canadian "Our Languages" app provides a useful example of how mobile tools can support indigenous language education. Social media platforms also amplify visibility. Campaigns using hashtags in minority languages, youth-led

vlogs, and digital storytelling competitions can encourage active online use, ensuring that these languages thrive in contemporary digital culture. Documentation of oral literature, proverbs, and songs through podcasts, YouTube channels, and online archives will provide permanent records and global access.

Through these combined strategies at government, educational, community, and digital levels, minority languages can be promoted not only as tools of heritage but also as living resources for education, identity, and development. The success of such efforts depends on synergy between policy, pedagogy, community pride, and modern technology, ensuring that Nigeria's rich linguistic diversity is preserved and strengthened for future generations.

Conclusion

Nigeria's National Policy on Education and the New National Language Policy embody important commitments to multilingual education, cultural preservation, and regional integration. Extending mother tongue instruction to six years aligns with global best practice and represents a significant policy advance. Similarly, the promotion of French as a second official language supports Nigeria's strategic interests within ECOWAS and the wider Francophone world. However, these policies are marked by deep contradictions and practical challenges. The prioritisation of English and French reproduces colonial hierarchies and diverts attention and resources away from Nigeria's rich indigenous linguistic diversity. Minority languages remain largely marginalised in both policy design and implementation. To realize the transformative potential of these policies, Nigeria must move beyond rhetorical commitments to sustained investment, inclusive planning, and community engagement. Only through deliberate, equitable, and well-funded strategies can the education system become

a genuine vehicle for cultural preservation, social inclusion, and national development in a multilingual context.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

1. Develop a Comprehensive Language Policy Framework that explicitly includes strategies for minority languages, moving beyond the dominant three Nigerian languages.
2. Invest in Teacher Education with specialised training for multilingual pedagogy, including minority languages.
3. Support Orthography and Materials Development through collaboration between government, universities, and communities.
4. Institutionalise Community Participation by creating local language boards and committees with decision-making power.
5. Ensure Equitable Funding by mandating dedicated budget lines for indigenous-language education.
6. Monitor and Evaluate Implementation through robust, transparent systems that track progress and challenges.

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