STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING MULTILINGUALISM AND THE NEW NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Nigeria is a multilingual country with over 500 indigenous languages, yet efforts to establish a national language have remained inconclusive and often controversial. These attempts have led to the classification of languages into major and minor, marginalizing many ethnic groups. In 2022, the Federal Government introduced a new National Language Policy aimed at revitalizing endangered indigenous languages and promoting multilingualism through an additive language model. This paper critically examines the policy's objectives and evaluates the strategies it adopts to promote multilingual competence, including mother tongue-based instruction, curriculum integration, and community-based language initiatives. It further interrogates the national language question within Nigeria's complex sociolinguistic context. The study highlights the policy's potential to foster linguistic inclusion and cultural preservation while identifying challenges to its implementation. The study concludes by offering recommendations for government, stakeholders, and citizens toward realizing the goal of sustainable multilingualism in Nigeria.

Keywords: multilingualism, national language policy, Nigeria, multilingual education, mother tongue-based education.

Introduction:

The 2022 National Language Policy in Nigeria represents a deliberate shift from English dominance toward an additive multilingual framework that seeks to enhance learning outcomes, preserve cultural heritage, and promotes national integration; however, its success depends on reconciling the aspiration of linguistic equality with the practical realities of implementation, including teacher preparation, curriculum design, adequate resourcing, and societal support

Nigeria is one of the world's most linguistically diverse nations, with over 500 indigenous languages spoken across its regions (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2023). This linguistic wealth represents a vital element of the country's cultural heritage and social identity. Despite this rich cultural heritage, there have been challenges for delivering equitable and effective education for national integration, education policy, and equitable development and for cultural preservation. Nigeria is one of the countries colonized by the British, who introduced English language, and which later became the official and national language used in almost every aspect of the nation. English became the only language that has dominated even our own national languages, Hausa, Ibo, and Yoruba. English language became the adopted language by Nigerians, and it has also been dominated by all in the education, legislatives, media, Business and so on. The Language policy decisions by the ministry of Education in conjunction with National Education and Research Development Council (NERDC) has come to the limelight to promote multilingualism that have in such settings

have far-reaching implications for social inclusion, cultural sustainability, and access to opportunity

English, Nigeria's colonial legacy, remains the dominant medium of instruction in Nigerian schools and has marginalized the local languages and threatening cultural erosion (Peter, 2019). Reinforcing social hierarchies and limiting access to meaningful learning for many children whose first language is not English (Obiakor & Offor, 2020). Nigerians are finding it difficult to speak their languages because they see it as a vernacular which does not conform to the global world. The NLP has come to improve the local languages alongside other foreign languages like French and Arabic to foster the promotion of multilingualism.

Recognizing these challenges and promotion of multilingualism fostering our cultural heritage is a hope for Nigerians when the government introduced a revised National Language Policy in 2022. This policy mandates indigenous languages as the medium of instruction throughout primary education while repositioning English as a subject (Federal Ministry of Education, 2022). This policy seeks to improve learning outcomes, preserve cultural heritage, and promote national cohesion by leveraging the benefit of mother tongue. Research has consistently demonstrated that children learn best in languages they understand, especially in early literacy and numeracy development (UNESCO 2016).

Nigeria's linguistic plurality reflects centuries of cultural evolution, migration, and contact among diverse groups. Major languages such as Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo dominate broad regions, but hundreds of smaller languages maintain local significance, making Nigeria one of the world's most multilingual countries (Eberhard et al., 2023). This diversity is both a cultural resource and a policy challenge.

Language planning in such contexts is inherently political, balancing goals of unity, equity, and cultural preservation. Bamgbose (2018) notes that effective

Language policy requires deliberate planning to avoid privileging certain languages over others while ensuring practical feasibility.

Colonial administration has institutionalized English as the language of governance, education, and economic opportunity, creating durable hierarchies that persist today. English remains the de facto gatekeeper to elite education and professional advancement (Igboanusi, 2019). Parental demand for English-medium instruction reflects this socioeconomic calculus, often undermining support for mother tongue education.

Post-independence policies have acknowledged these issues in principle. The National Policy on Education (Federal republic of Nigeria, 2013) endorsed mother tongue instruction in early grades, but implementation has been limited, under-resourced, and inconsistently monitored. This has posed major problems in the planning of previous policies in Nigeria unlike nations with the unimodal policy type because of Nigeria's multi languages contention for a national language. It is in the light of this that English language was chosen to be the language of the wider communication. The 2022 policy has come to empower other languages aside the three major national languages, hence the promotion of multilingualism.

Extensive research shows that children learn best in languages they understand, especially in foundational literacy and numeracy (UNESCO, 2016; Ouane & Glanz, 2015). Mother tongue based multilingual education is associated with improved learning outcomes, reduced dropout rates, and better cognitive development. However, Nigeria's failure to implement such models at scale has contributed to persistent educational

inequalities and undermined efforts at cultural preservation (Obiakor & Offor, 2020).

However, implementing multilingual education into meaningful practice remains complex, it requires more than policy declarations, it demands practical, evidenced based strategies to strengthen multilingual education, such as teacher training, curriculum development, community acceptance, resource constraint, and suitable funding and so on. In response to these challenges, the introduction of 2022 National language policy broadens the language planning and education policy. This new policy as will be seen is centred on the promotion of mother tongue based multilingual education. Ball 2018 opines that mother tongue based multilingual education enhances cognitive development, literacy acquisition and learner engagement, particularly in linguistically heterogeneous society like Nigeria. The 2022 National Language Policy (NNLP) therefore represents a decisive intervention. It mandates indigenous languages as the medium of instruction in basic education, repositions English as a subject, and introduces French, Arabic, and additional Nigerian languages at later levels (Federal Ministry of Education, 2022). By embedding mother tongue–based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) into law, the policy seeks to reverse the dominance of English and strengthen national cohesion through linguistic inclusion. However, its success depends on the feasibility of its strategies, including teacher training, curriculum design, adequate resources, and sustained public support. These provisions best foster multilingual education and aligns with Nigeria's national development objectives and international obligations.

This paper therefore in the context of Nigeria's multilingual reality examines how the 2022 national language policy seeks to foster linguistic diversity in Nigeria. It explores the policy's core provisions, highlights its unique features, and evaluates the strategies it proposes to integrate multilingual education.

The 2022 National Language Policy in Nigeria represents a deliberate shift from English dominance toward an additive multilingual framework that seeks to enhance learning outcomes, preserve cultural heritage, and. promotes national integration; however, its success depends on reconciling the aspiration of linguistic equality with the practical realities of implementation, including teacher preparation, curriculum design, adequate resourcing, and societal support

The 2022 National Language Policy

This document was published and hosted by the National Education Research and Development Council (NERDC); it was announced in late 2022. This announcement is brought about by an introduction of a revised national language policy to address long standing issues in language in education planning. The policy outlines objective such as "emboldening all Nigerian languages through innovative contemporary transformation process" The new National Language Policy represents and addresses an explicit effort to close the policy-practice gap. In essence language policy as defined by Ojetunde (2012) as the plan or course of action of a dynamic program in directing language affairs as needed by government. Also, according to NERDC 2022, language policy is a deliberate action by government through legislation for regulating the use, development, and promotion of all languages to meet defined national needs, aspirations, and priorities. It is a collaborative effort of the federal ministry of education and the former president of Nigeria. The policy, according to the former minister for education Adamu Adamu in his forward address on the NLP, he says "is to chart the way for the

regulation, use and development of all the languages in Nigeria, he went further to say that it is also a deliberate effort by the government to regulate the coexistence, development and utilization of all Nigeria language for national development. This implies that the policy is calling for the use of the acquired language which is L1 which is also the language of the immediate environment or the mother tongue instead of the learned language or L2. Hence the introduction of a language policy as a pivotal step towards recognizing and promoting the diverse linguistic heritage to be used in all sectors of the Nigerian populace, like the administration, education, and other socio-economic sectors. In framing the 2022 policy, cognizance was taken of Nigeria's status as a linguistically rich, ethnically diverse, and culturally complex nation. Key provisions include addressing the philosophy of the nation, which is to promote unity and harmony, which is also entrenched in ideologies that language is a veritable tool for the transformation and preservation of culture. The goal is to promote language for national heritage. It went further mandating indigenous languages or languages of the immediate environment as the medium of instruction at designated levels of education and to encourage the use of indigenous languages in different domains, like education, legislature administration and so on. The policy also encourages and promotes Nigerian languages for effective communication in the prints and media. (NNLP, 2022).

Ofodu, et al (2025) citing Prof. Ismail Junaidu stated that the earlier policy with the nation trying to formulate or adopt indigenous languages to be the lingua franca had not thrived because it has not considered all other language in the country as being equal. No language is superior to the other. What will be the fate of or position of other languages if only a few is given an upper hand to be used as lingual

franca or national language, knowing fully well that these languages each have their cultural identity and must be given equal right to national development. Hence the policy was published for uniform recognition of all languages for peace, unity and for national growth.

The executive secretary NERDC (2022) prof. Ismail Junaidu in his preface to the policy, mentioned that apart from recognizing all efforts made by past government in formulating a language policy and which had not yielded enough to promote the Nigerian language or the promotion of multilingualism. He further gave kudos to the combination of models who despite the pluralistic and multilingual nature of Nigeria could come up with a language policy to foster language education in Nigeria. Models like the status planning model that establishes the social role and standing languages, the corpus planning model in care of language research, codification, standardization, and documentation. The language in education model, in care regulating policy provision on language use in the education sector and the prestige planning model that takes care of boosting the status or role of languages.

The document is divided into eight (8) chapters, all chapters according to Prof. Junaidu is a comprehensive coverage of the language issues in Nigeria. Each addressing the language issues in Nigeria, the objective of the policy, highlighting the challenges and suggesting strategies for the realization of the multilingual position in achieving the aim of making the local languages to thrive and be revived from the state of eroding away. The NLP also makes room for proper monitoring and evaluation in the making sure of the realization of the policy. Chapter 1 gives a detailed background and context of the policy document stating the principles. Chapter 2 gives a highlight on the philosophy, goals, objectives, models, and principle of the policy. Chapter 3 is on declaration and statement on language and

language status. Chapter 4 on the use of language in different sectors of the nation's economy. Chapter 5 expounded the promotion, development, preservation and use of the Nigerian languages in all aspects of human endeavours. The implementation, sustainability and accountability strategies are discussed in chapter 6. In chapter 7, strategies for mobilization of funds and resources from all governmental levels were highlighted. The concluding chapter 8 gave specification to stake holders on their roles and responsibilities. The policy on its own goes beyond just learners learning the orthography and symbols of languages, or its linguistic structured way. Instead, the policy in its significance for promoting multilingualism, states that "mother tongue or languages of the immediate community (LIC) shall be used as a medium of instruction from ECCDE through primary six (6). English shall be taught as a subject". (FRN, 2022, p. 14), this calls for synergy between the languages and promotes national unity by exposing learners to other languages and making learners grounded learning better in the languages they best understand. (Ball 2018).

It is in this line that the paper will attempt to review the policy and examine the various strategies stated in promoting multilingualism in the realization of the policy's aims and objective.

In this vein, this research will answer the following questions

1. What ways has the National language policy addressed the problem of multilingualism?
2. How has the policy provided solution to the issue of multilingualism?
3. What are the strategies put in place by the policy to revive the transgenerational problem?
4. What specific strategies has the NLP used in solving cultural and linguistic loss?

5. What are the main challenges facing multilingualism in the implementation in the policy?

The concept of multilingualism and the national language question.

Multilingualism refers to the ability of societies, institutions, groups, and individuals to engage with more than one language in their day to day lives. It is a phenomenon that has become prevalent in the educational context due to historical, social. Political and economic reasons (https://www. Science direct.com) is aimed and known for the ability to speak 2 or more languages and not just be able to speak but being able to command its structures and grammatical aspects. Milo, (2018) opines that in a multilingual education, translanguaging is an approach. He defines translanguaging as an approach to teaching and learning the act of using these multiple language synergies. He further says that translanguaging is the concept that underlines the fluidity of language use, he further suggests that this approach invites students to draw on their linguistic repertoire and that multilinguals learn continually beyond their immediate linguistic knowledge.

Multilingualism can be referred to as an act or an ability of an individual or a speech community to be able to speak two or more languages. This is referred to being able to communicate with 2 or more languages fluently. One of the characteristics of a multi-ethnic community like Nigeria is that it is multilingual (Edem, 2018).

According to Barnabas et al citing Enang et al (2024), they opine that multilingualism is not peculiar to Nigeria; they further sys that multilingualism can be cited in Canada, Mexico, Australia, and United Kingdom and so on but that what is peculiar is that the number of languages spoken is not certain. Enang et al (2013) observed that some languages are major

while some are minor, and this is a flaw because no language is supposed to be minor or major. With the introduction of the language policy of 2022, it has come to recognize our languages not stating whether they are minor or major. The policy recognizes each language as either a mother tongue or a language of the immediate environment. Every child, whether Yoruba, Hausa or Ibo learns in his or her mother tongue or the language of the community. This in essence is a promotion to the languages and an additive strength to the child who might speak his native language and the language spoken in the community or any other.

The concept of multilingualism and the national language policy recognizes that all languages are equal, even down to the marginalized group. No language is superior to the other. The policy affords the speakers the citizens to be speakers of 2 or more languages not just in the local aspect but internationally. The policy introduces foreign languages like French and Arabic for learning (chapter 4).

The acceptance of English language in Nigeria is a language question. This is because of the role English plays in the Nigerian culture, this boils to the fact that the role still connotes colonization. Therefore, the new policy has introduced English language as a subject to be taught in schools, because of the global advantage on the netizens of Nigeria. Enang 2017 cited by Barnabas (2024) also observed that the countries multilingualism and multiculturalism provide great potential for greater and richer creativity.

Nigeria in her multilingual and multicultural state raises another question of which language is or will be the national language? Enang and Utim 2023 cited in Barnabas et al in 2024, says since there are more than 400 languages, and the policy has in its objective the desire to promote these languages by making each a medium of instruction in schools for the learners.

Also, making use of these languages in the curriculum will pose a lot of problems because there is no teaching and learning resources of these languages, many have no orthography and framed teachers to make this goal real.

From English Dominance to Additive Multilingualism

Addressing the problem of multilingualism, the new policy addresses the problem of multilingualism. The NNLP reframes Nigeria's linguistic order by mandating mother tongue or community language instruction through Primary 6 and repositioning English as a subject rather than the sole medium of instruction. This represents a fundamental shift from subtractive bilingualism—where the acquisition of English displaced indigenous languages—to additive multilingualism, where local and foreign languages coexist.

This change has both symbolic and practical importance. Symbolically, it signals recognition of Nigeria's linguistic heritage and a rejection of hierarchies that privilege English and a handful of major languages. Practically, it aligns with evidence that children learn best in languages they understand, especially in foundational literacy and numeracy (UNESCO, 2016; Ouane & Glanz, 2015). By embedding local languages at the heart of early education, the policy directly tackles exclusion and poor learning outcomes that stem from English-only schooling.

Strategies for Promoting Multilingualism

In addressing what solutions, the policy proposes and how it confronts intergenerational and cultural loss. The NNLP employs multiple strategies:
• Mother tongue instruction: Early education delivered in indigenous or community languages, with English taught as a subject. This strengthens

comprehension and supports cognitive development (Ball, 2018).

- Curriculum integration: From Primary 4, French is compulsory, Arabic optional, and at least one additional Nigerian language encouraged. This promotes plurilingual competence and intercultural awareness.
- Corpus and status planning: Documentation and codification of minority languages, along with their integration into media and governance, to prevent extinction.
- Cultural preservation: Embedding indigenous languages in schooling, literacy campaigns, and broadcasting to ensure intergenerational transmission and safeguard cultural identity.

Through these strategies, the policy not only responds to Nigeria's multilingual reality but also provides concrete mechanisms for reviving endangered languages, expanding domains of use, and promoting national unity.

Implementation Challenges

Possible barriers to the implementation of the policy, despite its promise, the NNLP faces four major challenges:

1. Linguistic challenges (orthography and resources): Many Nigerian languages lack standardized scripts, grammars, or teaching materials. Without corpus development, they cannot be used effectively in formal education.
2. Human capacity (teachers): Although trained indigenous-language teachers exist, they remain too few to meet national demand (Adegoke & Oduolowu, 2019). Expanding teacher education programs and continuous professional development is critical.
3. Financial constraints: Developing textbooks, training teachers, and producing digital content across hundreds of languages requires substantial investment. Without dedicated funding streams, the policy risks stagnation.
4. Sociocultural attitudes: Indigenous languages are often stigmatized as "vernacular" and undervalued compared to English. Public sensitization campaigns are necessary to shift attitudes and secure community buy-in.

These challenges highlight the gap between policy aspiration and practical feasibility. Addressing them requires deliberate investment, phased implementation, and coordinated efforts from government, civil society, and international partners.

Equality versus Prioritization: The Central Tension

A recurring theme in the NNLP is the claim that all Nigerian languages are equal and deserve recognition. This principle affirms linguistic rights but creates a practical dilemma: with over 500 languages, it is not feasible to standardize, staff, and resource every language simultaneously. Absolute equality risks becoming rhetorical if implementation capacity is limited.

A more pragmatic approach would involve prioritization without exclusion. This could mean piloting mother tongue instruction in languages with existing orthographies and teacher pools while gradually extending to others through phased corpus development. Regional clustering of related languages may also provide a cost-effective pathway. Such prioritization does not undermine equality but rather ensures that the policy delivers tangible results rather than symbolic recognition alone.

Nigeria's NNLP compares both favourably and cautiously with global experiences. South Africa's early-grade mother tongue instruction has struggled due

to resource shortages and persistent dominance of English (Heugh, 2019). Ethiopia's regional model, which extends mother tongue education through Grade 8, has seen more success but is uneven across regions.

Rwanda, in contrast, abandoned French for English in 2008, prioritizing global integration at the cost of local linguistic preservation (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010).

Nigeria's additive multilingualism model is ambitious in scope, but its feasibility will depend on balancing ideals of equality with practical prioritization. If adequately funded and implemented, it could become a continental model for inclusive multilingualism; if not, it risks repeating the failures of earlier policies.

Challenges and recommendations to promoting multilingualism

Having observed, examined, and analysed these strategies. There are still barriers that can hamper the implementation of these strategies. Even though the framework calls for multilingualism.

The following challenges were observed, and recommendations were made based on the strategies propounded above.

Firstly, many Nigerian languages do not have any form of written orthography, and no standard grammar rules, nor materials to allow for inclusion in the formal setting. There are not enough trained qualified teachers in the local language that are proficient this is a challenge to promoting multilingualism, it implies that the corpus planning model will still have to work on the languages by training the trainers who will work on the orthographies of the languages to improve the learning and teaching of such language. It is also recommended that the government needs to invest financially into this to have an effective promotion to multilingualism.

Secondly, the curriculum of today does not support the mother tongue-based instruction beyond the early years. This also implies that planning still needs to be done by a central committee of what to use and what to organize in a multilingual environment like Nigeria.

Furthermore, many languages are still referred to as vernacular and are seen as local, this idea will limit their usage in the formal education. The government on their part still need to create awareness to sensitize the citizens on the need to prioritize our indigenous languages. That the policy is aimed at maintaining societal cohesion, enhance acceptable communication and preserve linguistic heritage.

And finally, there are no resource materials for these local languages. The financial implications are overwhelming and substantial. Inadequate funding is a barrier to effective inclusion of all languages in literacy and educational programs. (Federal ministry of Education, 2022). Therefore, it is recommended that the government. provide adequate finances into the implementation, manpower supply should also be given priority because these are the personnel who will translate the policy into action.

Globalization involving digitalization is another constraint, there is a digital device gap between the apps and the people who have access to it in the area of technology, therefore the government should make effort for people to have access to technology especially in the grassroots.

Conclusion

The 2022 national language policy marks a critical shift in Nigeria language planning, replacing English dominance with a commitment to mother tongue based multilingual education. Its strategies ranging from indigenous language instruction to the inclusion of French and

Arabic hold promises for educational equity, cultural preservation, and national unity. The policy is more than an education reform, it is a nation building project that redefines how Nigerians learn, communicate and preserve their identities in a multilingual society. By mandating mother tongue instruction, integrating additional Nigerian and foreign languages, and embedding preservation strategies, the policy signals a deliberate break from the colonial legacy of English dominance. It reframes indigenous languages as tools of knowledge, not obstacles to progress, and asserts that linguistic diversity is an asset for sustainable development.

However, the feasibility of implementing hundreds of languages equally remains contested. The policy's aspiration toward absolute equality must be balanced against practical consideration of teacher supply, curriculum design and financial sustainability. Addressing these gaps requires political will, resources mobilisation, and societal attitudinal change.

The success of Nigeria's new language policy will depend not on its declaration but on its translation into practice. If effectively implemented, it could become a model for multilingual education in Africa, if neglected, it risks repeating the failure of past policies.

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