



INVESTING IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

OYEDOKUN SAMUEL AJAYI (PH.D)*

Department of Arts Education, Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti. Ekiti State, Nigeria.

***Corresponding Author**
OYEDOKUN SAMUEL AJAYI

Department of Arts Education,
Bamidele Olumilua University of
Education, Science and
Technology, Ikere-Ekiti. Ekiti
State, Nigeria.

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Abstract: This paper explores the crucial role that language education plays in Nigeria in the twenty-first century, focusing on the effects that language instruction has on national cohesiveness, economic growth, and cultural diplomacy. Nigeria presents particular possibilities and challenges in language teaching because it is one of the most linguistically varied countries in Africa. The study promotes the preservation and advancement of indigenous languages while highlighting the importance of the English language as the official language and its dominance in a number of ways. It emphasizes the advantages of language learning, such as better cognitive capacities, increased communication, cultural preservation and economic integration. An analysis of Nigeria's language educational system reveals problems like low funding, lack of qualified teachers and lack of adequate resources. The study suggests strategic investments in policy development, funding, teacher training, and community engagement to enhance language education. By fostering a multilingual society, Nigeria can leverage its linguistic diversity to achieve sustainable development and global competitiveness.

Keywords: Language education, Nigeria, linguistic diversity, economic growth, multilingual society.

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Introduction

Researches on Nigerian linguistic contexts have been relatively sparse in linguistic landscape (LL) literature, even though Nigeria holds a significant sociolinguistic importance in Africa. Language stands as one of the most significant symbols of social behaviour. It is clear that the facets of social behaviour and human interaction are often illuminated through examining language use within society and its connection to social dynamics. Nigeria, linguistically, is one of the most multilingual nations in Africa (Adegbija, 2004), with its population speaking approximately 553 indigenous languages (Blench, 2007). Thus, Nigeria is not only Africa's most populous nation but also it is most linguistically diverse and heterogeneous. As noted by Egbe (2014), Nigeria exemplifies one of the most intricate ethnolinguistic landscapes in Africa. The concept of the linguistic landscape has driven numerous linguists and researchers (including Griffin, 2004, and Ben-Rafael et al., 2006) to conduct studies across various sites, cities, and countries to demonstrate the significance of linguistic landscapes in these areas. The symbolic construction of public spaces can be observed through linguistic elements or visible language on public signs. Studying the visibility of language in public spaces reveals much about the distribution, status, vitality, and dominance of languages in different social and cultural settings. Nigeria epitomizes a multiethnic and multicultural nation where a variety of languages and cultures coexist and compete (Akindele and Adegbite, 2005).

Given Nigeria's multicultural and multilingual context, English language, imposed and left by colonial rulers, has become the official language. It is the primary medium of education, particularly from upper primary through tertiary levels, and is used for instruction and examinations. English language is also the language of government affairs across all branches and levels, including legislation, court proceedings, budgeting, and national economic planning. It dominates the mass media, trade and commerce, literature and entertainment, and international relations. For more than a decade, English language has overshadowed indigenous languages in the country Us or (2024). The study of multilingualism in Nigeria takes into account the sociolinguistic intricacies that result from the diversity of languages spoken by the people in the country as well as the sheer number of languages that they speak.

Nigeria operates a multilingual and pluralistic nation. Languages spoken in all 36 states of the federation and Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja have become more divergent than ever before which complicate the Nigerian linguistic landscape. In the same direction, with a particular reference to the sociolinguistic survey of language diversity and language use in Nigeria (NERDC 2008 revalidated, 2021), five hundred and forty languages spoken in Nigeria.

Nigeria has National Language Policy (NLP) whose philosophy is derived from the overall philosophy of the nation which emphasizes unity and harmony as one indivisible, indissoluble,

democratic and sovereign nation founded on the principle of freedom, equality and justice.

The philosophy of the NLP is entrenched in the underlying ideologies that:

- a. languages are verifiable tools for transformation, socio - economic and political development;
- b. languages are tied to culture and as such, serve as marks of identities and repositories of the traditions, norms and values of the different people of Nigeria;
- c. all Nigerian languages are national assets and treasures and must be preserved and transferred to the subsequent generations;
- d. languages in Nigeria have limitless potentials to generate economic activities, provide employment and create wealth;
- e. language is a catalyst for efficient quality and equitable education and provide access and opportunities that engender positive outcomes and global competitiveness.

Language learning impacts cultural diplomacy, it aids the productivity of future generations, economic growth, and the fulfilment of all Nigerians.

Importance of Language Education

Emphases are on the following importance of language education; it enhances communication and national unity, it promotes cultural preservation and facilitates economic growth and global integration

It enhances communication and national unity

Language education plays a pivotal role in enhancing communication and fostering national unity in Nigeria. As a country with over 500 indigenous languages, the ability to communicate effectively across diverse linguistic groups is crucial for national cohesion. English, as the official language, serves as a unifying medium that bridges the communication gap among different ethnic groups. According to Adebija (2004), the use of a common language promotes mutual understanding and reduces ethnic tensions. Additionally, when citizens are proficient in both English and their indigenous languages, it strengthens interpersonal connections and fosters a sense of belonging and national identity.

It promotes cultural preservation

Language education is instrumental in preserving Nigeria's rich cultural heritage. Each indigenous language carries unique cultural knowledge, traditions, and worldviews. By incorporating indigenous languages into the educational system, Nigeria ensures that these cultural elements are passed down to future generations. Blench (2007) emphasizes that teaching children in their mother tongues helps maintain cultural diversity and prevents language extinction. Furthermore, promoting multilingual education helps students appreciate and respect their own and others' cultural backgrounds, thereby enriching the national cultural tapestry.

It facilitates economic growth and global integration

Proficiency in multiple languages, especially English and major indigenous languages, facilitates economic growth and global integration. In the context of globalization, English serves as a key tool for accessing international markets, engaging in global trade, and attracting foreign investment. According to Egbe (2014), countries with higher levels of English proficiency tend to perform better economically due to their ability to participate in the global

economy more effectively. Moreover, multilingual individuals have a competitive edge in the job market, as they can communicate with a wider range of clients and partners. Language education thus equips the Nigerian workforce with the necessary skills to thrive in a globalized economy, contributing to national economic development.

Current State of Language Education in Nigeria

There is an increasing efforts of the federal government to integrate indigenous languages into the educational system as stated by NLP that:

- a. all Nigerian languages are national treasures and heritage and shall be preserved from endangerment and extinction; and
- b. all Nigerian languages are equal and none shall be held superior or inferior against the other.

Language Education at Primary and Secondary Levels

The curriculum for primary and secondary education in Nigeria is designed to provide foundational knowledge and skills, with a significant emphasis on language education. English is predominantly used as the medium of instruction from senior primary levels onwards, which reflects the colonial legacy and the need for a common lingua franca in a multilingual nation (Adebija, 2004). However, there is a growing recognition of the importance of incorporating indigenous languages into the curriculum to enhance cognitive development and cultural identity among students (Bamgbose, 2011). English remains the dominant language of instruction in Nigerian schools. This predominance stems from its status as the official language and its perceived value in global communication and economic opportunities (Egbe, 2014). The use of English in education aims to ensure uniformity and accessibility across the diverse linguistic landscape of Nigeria.

While English dominates, there is an increasing effort to integrate indigenous languages into the educational system. The National Policy on Education advocates for the use of mother tongue or the language of the immediate community in the early years of schooling (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). This policy aims to promote linguistic diversity and cultural preservation, although its implementation faces challenges due to resource constraints and varying degrees of linguistic homogeneity in different regions.

Despite the advocacy by the federal government, indigenous languages are reduced to the barest minimum in primary schools most especially among private schools without any caution that labelled them vernaculars.

Tertiary Education

At the tertiary level, Nigerian universities offer a range of language programs and departments dedicated to the study of both indigenous and foreign languages. These programs focus on linguistics, literature, and language teaching methodologies, aiming to produce graduates who are proficient in multiple languages and capable of contributing to academic and professional fields (Akindele & Adebite, 2005). Research and development in language studies are gaining momentum in Nigerian higher education institutions. Scholars are increasingly exploring the sociolinguistic dynamics of the country's multilingual environment, language policy, and the role of language in national development (Blench, 2007). However, the research output is often limited by funding and resource availability.

Challenges

One of the significant challenges facing language education in Nigeria is inadequate funding. Many educational institutions struggle with limited financial resources, which affects the quality of language programs and the availability of teaching materials (Egbe, 2014). There is a shortage of trained language teachers in Nigeria, particularly for indigenous languages. This shortage hampers the effective implementation of language education policies and reduces the quality of language instruction (Bamgbose, 2011). Insufficient resources and materials, such as textbooks and audiovisual aids, are a major hindrance to language education in Nigeria. Schools often lack the necessary tools to provide comprehensive language instruction, which affects students' learning outcomes and their ability to achieve proficiency in multiple languages (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013).

Not only this, most tertiary institutions have no or lowest enrollment in indigenous language courses as it is not fashionable among enrollees to register for them. The society seems to look down on those that study indigenous languages as morons with little mental aptitude to compete favourably with other students. Other challenges include the non-seriousness of the federal government to sustain its advocacy through pronouncement and provision of logistics needed in form of scholarships and grants

Importance of Language Education in the 21st Century

Economic benefits

- **It enhances employability and job opportunities:** Language education significantly enhances employability and job opportunities. Proficiency in multiple languages is a valuable asset in the job market, allowing individuals to access a broader range of employment opportunities both locally and internationally. According to the Global Scholar (2021) multilingual individuals have a competitive edge in various professional fields, including international business, diplomacy, and tourism.
- **It attracts foreign investment:** A multilingual workforce is attractive to foreign investors, as it facilitates smoother communication and negotiation processes. Sanako (2020) notes that countries with a high level of language proficiency are better positioned to engage in global trade and attract foreign direct investment. By investing in language education, Nigeria can improve its economic prospects and create a more inviting environment for international businesses.
- **It boosts tourism:** Language education also plays a crucial role in boosting tourism. Tourists are more likely to visit destinations where they can communicate effectively with locals. Blench (2007) highlights that promoting language learning, particularly in major international languages, can enhance the tourism experience and increase tourist satisfaction, leading to a more robust tourism industry.

Social and Cultural Benefits

- It promotes social cohesion and national identity: Language education promotes social cohesion and national identity by fostering mutual understanding and respect among diverse linguistic groups. Bamgbose (2011) emphasizes that a shared language can bridge ethnic divides and strengthen national unity. Teaching both indigenous languages and a common national language helps to build a cohesive society where all citizens feel included and valued.

- It preserves linguistic and cultural heritage: Language education is essential for preserving Nigeria's rich linguistic and cultural heritage. By incorporating indigenous languages into the educational system, the country can ensure that these languages and the cultural knowledge they embody are passed down to future generations. Adegbiya (2004) argues that preserving linguistic diversity is crucial for maintaining cultural diversity and heritage.
- It encourages inter-ethnic understanding and cooperation: Language education encourages inter-ethnic understanding and cooperation by promoting multilingualism and cultural exchange. When individuals learn multiple languages, they gain insights into different cultures and perspectives Edinyang, Tandu & Gimba (2015) which fosters empathy and reduces prejudices. This can lead to more harmonious relationships and collaboration among Nigeria's various ethnic groups.

Educational Benefits

- It improves cognitive abilities and academic performance: Learning multiple languages has been shown to improve cognitive abilities and academic performance. Studies indicate that bilingual and multilingual individuals tend to have better problem-solving skills, memory, and creativity (Portsmouth High School Blog (2024)). Language education enhances overall cognitive development, which can translate into improved academic outcomes for students.
- It encourages lifelong learning and adaptability: Language education encourages lifelong learning and adaptability. The skills acquired through learning languages such as critical thinking, communication, and cultural awareness are valuable throughout an individual's life. Blench (2007) notes that these skills help individuals adapt to changing environments and continue learning in a rapidly evolving global landscape.
- It facilitates access to global knowledge and resources: Proficiency in multiple languages facilitates access to global knowledge and resources. English, being a major global language, opens up vast amounts of information and educational resources. Faster Capital (2024) points out that language education enables students to engage with international literature, research, and technological advancements, thereby broadening their horizons and enhancing their educational experience.

Strategies for Effective Investment in Language Education

1. Policy Development

- ✓ **Formulating a comprehensive language policy:** Creating a thorough language policy is essential to successful language learning. A well-written policy specifies the objectives, procedures, and requirements for teaching languages at different educational levels. Deynolds (2019) contends that language policy ought to be comprehensive and represent the variety of languages spoken in the country. To make sure the policy is fair and long-lasting, this entails carrying out in-depth needs assessments and involving a range of stakeholders, such as linguists, educators, and community leaders.
- ✓ **Incorporating indigenous languages in the national curriculum:** Including native languages in the national curriculum helps kids develop their cultural identities and cognitive abilities while also protecting linguistic legacy. The

significance of teaching indigenous languages in fostering social inclusion and academic success is emphasized by Tsaure and Sani (2024). It is ensured that these languages are respected and studied alongside dominant languages by integrating them into education at all levels, from primary to university.

- ✓ **Ensuring language education is compulsory at all levels:** Making language education compulsory at all levels of schooling ensures consistent and widespread proficiency. This approach helps build a multilingual populace capable of engaging in diverse social and economic contexts. Research by Chisunum and Eboh –Nzekwue (2022) suggests that compulsory language education fosters better cognitive flexibility and intercultural competence among students, preparing them for global citizenship.

2. Funding and Resources

- ✓ **Increasing government and private sector investment:** Programmes for teaching languages must have adequate support from the public and private sectors. According to Osuji, C. N., Mafara, R. M., and Chagbe (2016), deliberate investments in language instruction result in major socioeconomic advantages over the long run. Governments should set aside large sums of money to create language programs, and businesses can help by partnering and sponsoring events.
- ✓ **Developing and distributing educational materials in multiple languages:** Ensuring that educational materials are created and disseminated in different languages guarantees that every student has access to resources that are customized to meet their language needs. As stated by Alday (2013). Multilingual teaching resources enhance overall learning outcomes by bridging understanding gaps. This entails creating fresh content that represents the linguistic and cultural variety of the student body as well as translating already-existing materials.
- ✓ **Utilizing technology and digital platforms for language learning:** The use of digital platforms and technology can greatly improve language learning opportunities. Students can learn new languages in a flexible and interesting way with the use of interactive tools, online resources, and language learning apps. The revolutionary potential of technology in language education, especially in terms of accessibility and individualized learning, is highlighted by Bećirović, Brdarević-Čelj, and Delić (2021).

3. Teacher Training and Professional Development

- ✓ **Establishing language teacher training institutes:** The preparation of educators who are skilled in both language instruction and cultural competency is mostly dependent upon dedicated language teacher training institutions. O'Sullivan (2020) emphasizes the need of specialized training that gives educators the tools they need to create environments that are conducive to successful language acquisition. These organizations may provide workshops, certification courses, and opportunities for practical training.
- ✓ **Providing continuous professional development opportunities:** Language instructors are guaranteed to be up to date on the newest linguistic research and pedagogical approaches through continuous professional development. Collin, Heijden and Lewis (2012) support continuous professional development, conferences, and cooperative

learning communities as means of assisting educators in honing their craft and exchanging best practices.

- ✓ **Offering Competitive Salaries and Incentives to Retain Qualified Teachers:** Competitive pay and benefits are crucial for luring and keeping top-notch language instructors. Financial incentives and chances for career progression, according to Li, and Tim (2017), help teachers feel more satisfied with their work and have lower turnover rates, which guarantees that pupils receive education that is high-quality and consistent every time.

4. Community and Stakeholder Engagement

- ✓ **Involving Local Communities in Language Education Initiatives:** Including local populations in language learning programmes promotes a welcoming and inclusive learning environment. The need of community involvement in developing culturally appropriate and responsive educational practices is emphasized by Sarbunan (2023). Community members can assist with language preservation efforts, contribute cultural insights, and help build curricula.
- ✓ **Promoting Partnerships between Government, NGOs, and the Private Sector:** Collaborations among public and private sectors, as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), can expand the scope and efficacy of language education initiatives. These kinds of partnerships may offer more resources, knowledge, and creative solutions. Multi-sector partnerships have a crucial role in tackling educational difficulties and advancing sustainable development, as noted by Baker (2006).
- ✓ **Raising awareness about the value of multilingualism:** Raising awareness about the cognitive, social, and economic benefits of multilingualism is essential for garnering public support for language education initiatives. Kalaja and Pitkänen-Huhta (2020) points out that promoting the value of multilingualism can lead to greater acceptance and enthusiasm for learning multiple languages. Public campaigns, media outreach, and community events can help highlight the advantages of a multilingual society.

By implementing these strategies, policymakers, educators, and communities can work together to create a robust and inclusive language education system that meets the diverse needs of learners and promotes linguistic and cultural diversity.

Conclusion

The relationship between language and development in Nigeria highlights how important linguistic diversity is for promoting economic progress, cultural diplomacy, and national cohesiveness. Being the official language, English is essential for both domestic and international communication and for gaining access to opportunities around the world. However, preserving cultural history and identity depends just as much on the promotion and preservation of indigenous languages. Incorporating indigenous languages alongside English into language education policy can improve student performance, encourage social inclusion, and advance sustainable development. Reforming curricula and offering teacher training programs are essential ways to give educators the tools they need to work in multilingual classrooms. Nigeria may use its rich cultural resources to accomplish more ambitious developmental objectives and guarantee a more prosperous and inclusive future for all of its population by embracing its linguistic variety.

Recommendations

Recommendations were made as follows:

That the Nigerian government enact and enforce multilingual education laws that incorporate both English and native languages into the school curriculum. Creating thorough language curricula from elementary school through higher education would be necessary to guarantee that students become proficient in both their home tongues and English.

In order for educators to successfully instruct in a multilingual setting, it is imperative that they construct specific training programmes. Teachers should be able to instruct in both native tongues and English in order to promote a more effective and inclusive educational system.

Indigenous languages should be encouraged to be used in digital platforms, media, and technology in order to guarantee their continued existence and expansion. This includes making apps and tools for language learning as well as producing content in native tongues for online, radio, and television channels.

It is imperative that linguistic research and the documentation of Nigeria's indigenous languages receive more funding. To conserve and teach these languages to future generations, this involves compiling extensive lexicons, dictionaries, and educational materials.

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