

The social context for language policy implementation in Nigeria: A neglected situation?

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Abstract

This paper examines the complex relationship between Nigeria's linguistic diversity and the social context in which language policies are implemented. It focuses on the current state of language policy implementation in Nigeria and explores the reasons behind its neglect in many parts of the country. The primary objective is to analyze how social factors such as ethnicity, education, and the urban - rural divide influence language use and policy effectiveness. Drawing on the language planning and policy frameworks of Spolsky and Fishman, the study investigates how language choice in multilingual communities shapes communication in education, government, and the media. Adopting a qualitative research design, data were collected through observations in various regions, with attention to the interaction between indigenous languages and English in everyday contexts. A content-based analysis reveals a significant gap between official language policies and their practical implementation. The findings highlight the urgent need for a more inclusive language policy that integrates indigenous languages into education, government, and media. Recommendations include the introduction of bilingual education, increased representation of indigenous languages in the media, and revision of the national language policy to reflect Nigeria's linguistic diversity. The paper concludes that without such reforms, the preservation of Nigeria's rich linguistic heritage and effective communication in multilingual communities will remain elusive, thereby impeding social cohesion and educational progress.

Keywords: Language policy, multilingualism, linguistic diversity, Nigerian indigenous languages.

Introduction

Nigeria is widely recognized for its rich linguistic diversity, hosting over 500 languages spoken across its 36 states and Federal Capital Territory. This immense variety reflects the country's multicultural makeup, comprising numerous ethnic groups, each with distinct languages, dialects, and cultural practices. The country's large group languages, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, serve as lingua franca in the northern, southwestern, and southeastern regions respectively, while English, the official language, occupies a dominant role in governance, education, and the economy. This complex linguistic environment has necessitated the formulation of language policies to address issues surrounding communication, education, national unity, and cultural preservation. However, the challenge of balancing linguistic diversity with national cohesion has made language policy in Nigeria a critical but often neglected issue.

The National Policy on Education (NPE) is one of the most notable policy provisions through which Nigeria has attempted to manage its linguistic diversity. There are other such policy provisions. The policy in the NPE emphasizes the use of mother tongues or local languages in early education, advocating for bilingualism or multilingualism among Nigerian citizens. The idea is that children will learn better if taught in their mother tongue during their formative years while gaining proficiency in English for broader communication. However, the implementation of this policy has been inconsistent across the country. In many urban areas, English dominates the educational system, while indigenous languages are relegated to informal settings. This discrepancy reflects broader societal attitudes, where proficiency in English is often equated with socio-economic mobility and success, particularly in urban centers.

In rural areas and among smaller ethnic groups, there is a growing concern over the marginalization of small group languages. These communities often feel excluded from mainstream social and political life, where dominant languages, both indigenous and foreign, hold sway. For instance, in northern Nigeria, Hausa serves as a regional lingua franca, often overshadowing smaller languages spoken by ethnic minorities. Similarly, in the southwest and southeast, Yoruba and Igbo dominate, leaving less widely spoken languages at risk of extinction. Consequently, many minority languages in Nigeria face the threat of gradual decline as speakers shift towards more dominant languages for economic and social reasons.

The tension between English and Nigeria's indigenous languages is central to the country's language policy challenges. English is seen as a tool for national unity and international

communication, yet its dominance often undermines the development and preservation of local languages. Moreover, while Nigeria's Constitution and policies recognize the importance of promoting indigenous languages, inadequate funding, poor implementation, and societal attitudes continue to hinder progress.

In light of Nigeria's linguistic complexity, there is an urgent need for a more effective and inclusive language policy. Such a policy must not only promote national cohesion but also ensure the preservation and development of Nigeria's rich linguistic heritage, particularly its endangered small group languages. To achieve this, a more concerted effort is required from both governmental and non-governmental stakeholders to address the gaps in policy formulation and implementation, ensuring that language remains a tool for both unity and cultural preservation.

Nigeria's rich linguistic diversity, with over 500 languages, presents both opportunities and challenges. While the country's multilingual nature reflects its vibrant cultural heritage, it also complicates communication, education, and governance. The dominance of English, alongside the regional dominance of Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, has resulted in the marginalization of many small group languages, leading to concerns about their decline and eventual extinction. Language policies, such as the National Policy on Education (NPE), which advocates for the use of indigenous languages in early education, aim to promote bilingualism and multilingualism. However, the inconsistent implementation of these policies, particularly in urban centers where English is prioritized, exacerbates the marginalization of small group languages. Moreover, the socio-political and economic realities in Nigeria contribute to the problem. English proficiency is often associated with upward mobility, pushing many parents and schools to prioritize it over indigenous languages. As a result, the majority of children, especially in urban areas, are deprived of the benefits of mother-tongue education, which research shows enhances early learning and cognitive development. In rural areas, smaller ethnic groups face exclusion as dominant languages overshadow their own, limiting their access to education and political participation. Thus, the problem lies in the inadequate and inconsistent implementation of Nigeria's fragments of language policies, which fail to address the country's linguistic complexities, resulting in the marginalization and decline of indigenous languages, particularly small group languages. There is an urgent need for a more inclusive, effective approach to language policy that balances national unity with the preservation of Nigeria's linguistic diversity.

This study aims to explore the challenges and implications of Nigeria's fragments of language policy on its linguistic diversity, focusing on the following specific objectives:

- I. To assess the current state of Nigeria's language policy and its impact on linguistic diversity.
- II. To examine the challenges faced by small group languages in the implementation of language policy.
- III. To evaluate the effectiveness of language policy in promoting both indigenous languages and English in education.

The study is guided with the following questions:

- I. What is the current state of Nigeria's language policy, and how does it affect linguistic diversity?
- II. What challenges do small group languages face in the implementation of Nigeria's language policy?
- III. How effective is Nigeria's language policy in promoting both indigenous languages and English in education?

This study is significant in addressing the growing concerns surrounding Nigeria's linguistic diversity, particularly the marginalization of small group languages. By examining the effectiveness and implementation of fragments of Nigeria's language policies, the study highlights the need for more inclusive approaches that protect and promote indigenous languages, ensuring their preservation for future generations.

Additionally, the study provides valuable insights into the socio-political implications of language use in Nigeria, especially the role of English in education and national cohesion. The findings will benefit policy makers, educators, and linguistic scholars by providing data-driven recommendations for improving language policy to foster both unity and cultural diversity.

For the small group language communities, the study underscores the importance of preserving linguistic heritage, empowering them to advocate for stronger policy measures. Moreover, it contributes to the global discourse on language preservation, serving as a case study for other multilingual countries grappling with similar challenges. Ultimately, the study seeks to promote a balanced approach to language policy, preserving Nigeria's linguistic richness while fostering national unity.

Overview of language policy

Language policy refers to the principles and regulations that govern language use within a community or nation. According to Spolsky (2004), language policy encompasses three interrelated components: language practices (what people actually do with language), language beliefs (attitudes about language), and language management (official efforts to regulate language use). He argues that effective language policy must consider all three elements to achieve its intended goals.

Fishman (1991) contributes to this field through his theory of Reversing Language Shift (RLS), which emphasizes the need for strategic efforts to revive endangered languages. He advocates for the active promotion of small group languages through education, cultural programs, and legal frameworks, suggesting that these measures can help reverse the dominance of major languages in multilingual settings.

Cooper (1989) views language planning as a socio-political process, arguing that language policies often reflect power dynamics within a society. He notes that language planning decisions are rarely neutral, as they often favour dominant social groups at the expense of small group languages.

Kaplan & Baldauf (1997) define language policy as a systematic approach to managing linguistic diversity within a community, emphasizing that language planning requires both top-down and bottom-up strategies. They stress the importance of involving local communities in the planning process to ensure the success of language policies.

In sum, these scholars underscore the complex nature of language policy, highlighting the need for a comprehensive approach that includes social, political, and cultural considerations. Effective language policy must account for the dynamics of language use, power relations, and community involvement to succeed.

The role of social context in language policy

Social factors play a significant role in shaping language use, particularly in multilingual contexts. Spolsky (2004), highlights that, language policy cannot be fully understood without considering the social environment in which it operates. He argues that social attitudes, economic factors, and political power structures heavily influence language practices, particularly in multilingual societies where language choice often reflects social hierarchies.

Fishman (1968) emphasizes the role of societal domains in language use. He develops the domain theory, suggesting that different languages or dialects are used depending on the social context, such as family, religion, education, or government. According to Fishman, the interaction between social factors and language choice is a key determinant in the survival or decline of small group languages in multilingual settings.

Bourdieu (1991) introduces the concept of linguistic capital, emphasizing that language use is influenced by social class and power relations. He argues that dominant languages often gain prestige, becoming a form of capital that provides social and economic advantages. The small group languages, in contrast, are marginalized resulting in a shift towards the dominant language for socio-economic mobility. Ricento (2006) stresses that social factor like migration, urbanization, and globalization play critical roles in shaping language policies. He notes that language planning must account for these social dynamics to be effective, as they significantly impact the linguistic landscape of a society.

Therefore, these scholars demonstrate that social context profoundly affects language use and policy. Effective language policy must therefore address the underlying social factors that shape language practices, such as power relations, cultural norms, and socio-economic conditions. Lack of the consideration of social factors in a nation's language policies formation and implementation, may risk the policy being ineffective or exclusionary.

Studies on language policy in multilingual nations: Examples from other countries

Language policy in multilingual nations is shaped significantly by the social context, as evidenced by various global case studies. In South Africa, Alexander (2003) discusses how post-apartheid language policy sought to promote multilingualism by recognizing 11 official languages. However, English and Afrikaans remain dominant due to their socio-economic prestige, leading to the marginalization of indigenous languages in education and government services. The gap between policy and actual language practice is largely influenced by historical power dynamics and economic factors.

In Canada, Heller (1999) explores the implementation of bilingual policies designed to promote both English and French. Despite legal frameworks that guarantee language rights, Heller notes that English remains dominant in most regions outside Quebec. Social and economic pressures contribute to the shift towards English, particularly among younger generations in Francophone communities, reflecting how societal factors impact the success of language policy.

In Singapore, Cavallaro and Ng (2009) examine the bilingual education policy, which promotes English for global competitiveness and mother-tongue languages for cultural preservation. While the policy is theoretically balanced, English has increasingly become the primary language for many Singaporeans, a trend driven by economic aspirations and social mobility, highlighting how socio-economic contexts affect language choice.

In summary, these studies show that even well-intentioned language policies are often shaped by socio-economic, historical, and political factors, which can result in the unintended dominance of certain languages over others. This highlights the importance of aligning language policies with the actual social realities of multilingual communities to ensure effective implementation.

Empirical review

Spolsky's study in (2004), is on "Language Policy in Israel: The Role of Hebrew and Minority Languages". This applied his framework of language policy, which includes language practices, language beliefs, and language management. This theory emphasizes the interconnectedness of these components in determining the success of language policy. Spolsky conducted qualitative research by analyzing government documents, public speeches, and societal language practices. His research revealed that Hebrew's dominance in Israel has marginalized small group languages like Arabic, despite legal recognition of Arabic as an official language. Spolsky concluded that language policy in Israel must address the imbalance between Hebrew and the small group languages to foster linguistic inclusivity. He recommended greater institutional support for Arabic in education and public spaces. The study's primary weakness is its limited focus on Hebrew and Arabic, ignoring the experiences of other small group languages. This oversight suggests the need for a broader examination of multilingualism in Israel's complex linguistic landscape.

Ricento's research in 2006 on "Language Policies and Immigrant Communities in the United States" utilized a socio-political framework, which views language policy as a reflection of power dynamics within a society. He argues that language policies in the U.S. are shaped by the dominance of English and the marginalization of immigrant languages. The study used qualitative methods, including interviews with policy-makers and immigrant families, and document analysis of educational and governmental language policies. Ricento found that immigrant languages are marginalized in education and public institutions, contributes to the gradual shift towards English among immigrant communities. Ricento suggested that U.S. language policies must accommodate immigrant

languages to promote cultural diversity and prevent language loss. He recommended bilingual education programs to support immigrant language retention. The study's weakness lies in its lack of focus on intergenerational language transmission. Ricento did not explore how these policies specifically affect younger generations, leaving a gap in understanding the long-term impact of language policies on immigrant communities.

Bamgbose (2011), came up with his study titled: "Language Policy and Development in Africa: The Legacy of Colonial Languages". He adopted a post-colonial theoretical framework, which examined how colonial languages continue to dominate African language policies, particularly in education and governance. Bamgbose used a comparative case study method, analyzing language policies across multiple African countries, including Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa. His research found that colonial languages, such as English and French, still dominate educational systems and official communication, overshadowing indigenous languages. He argued that this linguistic imbalance hinders the development of indigenous languages and local cultures. Bamgbose recommended the promotion of bilingual education systems where indigenous languages are used alongside colonial languages. He called for increased governmental support for the development of written materials and teacher training in indigenous languages. The study's broad scope across multiple African countries made it difficult to provide in-depth analysis of specific communities. Bamgbose did not focus on smaller, multilingual communities where language policy dynamics may differ significantly from larger, more homogenous regions.

Therefore, the present study seeks to address the weaknesses identified in these empirical studies by focusing on a specific multilingual community in Nigeria. Unlike Spolsky's narrow focus on two dominant languages, this study explores the complex linguistic dynamics between English and the dominant ethnic group's languages. The research addresses Ricento's oversight on intergenerational transmission by investigating how younger generations in multilingual Nigerian communities navigate language policy. Finally, this study fills the gap left by Bamgbose by offering an in-depth case study of Nigeria, underrepresented society, rather than a broad cross-country analysis.

Theoretical review

Spolsky's (2004) *Language Policy Theory* emphasizes that language policy consists of three interrelated components: language practices (how people use language), language beliefs or ideologies (what people think about language), and language management (explicit efforts to modify language use). This theory is highly relevant to the current study as it allows for

an examination of Nigeria's multilingual environment, particularly focusing on the interaction between the people. Spolsky's framework helps in analyzing how social context influences language use and how language policies either support or hinder the preservation of small group languages like the indigenous languages. His approach highlights how informal practices often conflict with formal policies, which can lead to language shifts. In this study, Spolsky's theory serves as the primary theoretical framework because it directly addresses the complex relationship between language practices, beliefs, and policy management within multilingual communities like those in Nigeria.

Bamgbose's (2011) *Post-colonial Language Policy Theory* critiques the dominance of colonial languages (like English in Nigeria) and advocates for the promotion and revitalization of indigenous languages in post-colonial societies. Bamgbose argues that language policies in countries like Nigeria are still heavily influenced by colonial legacies, which marginalize local languages in favour of the former colonial language. This theory is particularly applicable to the current study, as it provides a critical lens to examine how colonial history continues to affect language policy implementation in Nigeria where the use of English often undermines the status of indigenous languages like Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and other languages. Bamgbose's emphasis on the need for policy reforms to support indigenous languages complements Spolsky's theory by adding a historical dimension to the analysis. In this study, Bamgbose's theory serves as the secondary theoretical framework, enriching the investigation by offering a critical view of language policies that are shaped by historical inequalities. Together, these two theories provide a comprehensive foundation for analyzing the impact of social and historical factors on language policy and language choice in Nigeria.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how social factors influence language choice and policy implementation in multilingual communities. Through observations and document analysis, this approach provides in-depth insights into the linguistic dynamics in Nigeria.

Data collection was conducted through observations across diverse communities in Nigeria. This method allowed for the examination of real-life language use and interactions, capturing how social, cultural, and political factors shape language choice and policy implementation in Nigeria's multilingual context. Observations provided in-depth insights into everyday linguistic practices across different regions of the country.

The sample population for the study includes speakers of various indigenous languages in Nigeria, focusing on communities where these languages are predominantly used. Participants were selected from diverse ethnic backgrounds to ensure representation of different linguistic groups. This approach facilitates a comprehensive analysis of language choice and policy implementation in Nigeria's multilingual context.

Data was analyzed using content-based analysis, where patterns and themes related to language choice and policy implementation were identified from observational notes. This method allowed for a detailed examination of how social, cultural, and political factors shape language practices in Nigeria's multilingual communities, providing in-depth qualitative insights.

Results and discussion

Observation of language usage in multilingual communities

During observations in multilingual communities across Nigeria, it became evident that while English is often used in public spaces like markets, schools, and religious settings, indigenous languages continue to dominate in informal, familial, and social contexts. This linguistic duality suggests a clear separation between the formal and informal spheres of communication. English, being the official language of Nigeria, is used predominantly in formal interactions due to its association with education, administration, and broader inter-ethnic communication. However, in personal and community interactions, indigenous languages such as Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are more frequently spoken, preserving cultural identity and local heritage.

The observation highlights the functional role that indigenous languages still play despite the formal dominance of English. This trend suggests that, while English serves as a unifying language for national and cross-cultural communication, indigenous languages remain integral to personal identity and social cohesion within ethnic groups. However, the informal dominance of these languages underscores the challenge that language policy faces in promoting the full integration of indigenous languages into formal sectors. The current policy favours English in educational and administrative settings, which may contribute to the gradual erosion of indigenous language use in younger generations. To address this, language policy needs to strike a balance, recognizing the importance of indigenous languages in national unity and cultural preservation while maintaining English as a tool for broader communication.

Language preference in educational settings

Observations in primary and secondary schools across Nigeria reveal that English is predominantly used as the medium of instruction, despite the provisions of the National Language Policy (NLP) approved in 2022 and officially implemented in 2023 by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) and the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC). According to the updated NLP, the language of the immediate environment or mother tongue is to be used as the medium of instruction from Early Childhood Care and Development Education (ECCDE) through Primary Six, while English is taught only as a subject during this period. However, in practice, especially in many rural and underserved areas where English continues to dominate classroom instruction due to inadequate materials and insufficiently trained teachers in indigenous languages.

This policy-practice gap has resulted in a prevalent phenomenon: teachers frequently switch between English and indigenous languages to explain complex concepts and ensure learner comprehension. This code-switching reflects the sociolinguistic reality in many Nigerian classrooms where most pupils enter school with limited or no proficiency in English, particularly in early grades. Consequently, teachers resort to local languages as a pedagogical strategy to bridge gaps in understanding, enhance participation, and foster meaningful learning.

The National Language Policy supports this approach by emphasizing that using the child's first language in education promotes literacy, improves cognitive development, and fosters better academic outcomes. Research also affirms that instruction in mother tongues enhances pupils' engagement, attendance, and comprehension. Therefore, integrating indigenous languages in teaching is not only a reflection of Nigeria's multilingual reality but also a practical response to improving educational access and equity. The current NLP acknowledges these dynamics and calls for a more inclusive and linguistically responsive educational system that values both English and indigenous languages.

The observation underscores the shortcomings of Nigeria's language-in-education policy, which, in practice rather than in design, promotes English as the dominant medium of instruction. Although the National Language Policy (2023) and the National Policy on Education advocate the use of the mother tongue or language of the immediate environment from Early Childhood Education through Primary Six (NERDC, 2023), implementation has been inconsistent, especially in urban schools where English is often used exclusively. This

practice disregards Nigeria's vast linguistic diversity and overlooks the cognitive and pedagogical advantages of multilingual education. Research by UNESCO (2023) affirms that children learn best in languages they understand, particularly in the foundational years of schooling.

The frequent use of indigenous languages by teachers to clarify lessons or engage learners, especially in rural areas, reflects a bottom-up adaptation to linguistic realities in Nigerian classrooms. It highlights a critical gap between policy ideals and classroom practices. By failing to formally support and operationalize the use of indigenous languages beyond policy declarations, the system places non-English-speaking learners at a distinct disadvantage, thereby widening the learning gap between students in rural and urban areas (BusinessDay, 2024).

To address this inequity, there is a pressing need to strengthen the implementation of a bilingual or multilingual education framework that incorporates both indigenous languages and English in a complementary manner. Such an approach would foster better comprehension, promote inclusivity, enhance cultural relevance, and still support English proficiency. Recognizing and utilizing Nigeria's linguistic resources in education would not only align with current policy but also improve learning outcomes across diverse educational settings.

Indigenous language use in government and public institutions

In government and public institutions across Nigeria, English dominates formal communication, particularly in written documents, official speeches, and inter-departmental communication. However, observations indicate that in informal conversations and interactions with members of the public who have limited English proficiency, indigenous languages are frequently used. This bilingual dynamic reveals a gap between the language policy, which prioritizes English, and the linguistic realities of the Nigerian populace, particularly in rural areas where indigenous languages are more widely spoken than English.

This finding underscores the need for a more inclusive language policy in public institutions, one that accommodates the multilingual nature of Nigeria. While English is necessary for uniformity and international communication, the use of indigenous languages in informal settings highlights their continued relevance and the role they play in ensuring effective communication at the grassroots level. The current language policy overlooks the

accessibility of services in indigenous languages, which could hinder public participation and limit citizens' access to governmental resources, particularly in rural areas. To bridge this gap, there should be provisions within language policy that encourage the use of indigenous languages in public service delivery, particularly in interactions with local communities. Such measures would promote inclusivity and ensure that language is not a barrier to accessing government services.

Media and indigenous language representation

The media plays a significant role in shaping language use in Nigeria. Observations of radio and television programming revealed that indigenous languages are heavily represented, particularly in entertainment, news broadcasts, and talk shows targeting rural and semi-urban audiences. For example, radio programs in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, are common in rural areas, providing access to information and entertainment in languages that the audience understands best. In contrast, print and digital media, particularly newspapers and online platforms, are largely dominated by English. This disparity suggests that while indigenous languages thrive in broadcast media, especially radio, they are underrepresented in other forms of mass communication.

The prominence of indigenous languages in radio broadcasts highlights the importance of this medium in reaching rural populations who may have limited English proficiency. However, the dominance of English in print and digital media points to a linguistic divide between urban and rural audiences, where English-speaking populations have greater access to written and digital content. To address this imbalance, there is a need for language policy to encourage the expansion of indigenous languages into print and digital media. This would ensure that all linguistic groups in Nigeria have equal access to information, regardless of the medium. Expanding indigenous language content by promoting its inclusion in enhancing comprehension preserves culture, supports literacy, and bridges communication gaps in multilingual Nigeria. So, across all media platforms, this would promote linguistic diversity and support the preservation of Nigeria's rich multilingual heritage.

Conclusion

The observations across Nigeria reveal the complex interplay between formal language policy and the real-world use of indigenous languages. While English is predominantly

used in formal settings, indigenous languages continue to play an essential role in social, educational, and informal contexts. The findings underscore the need for Nigeria's language policy to be more inclusive, recognizing the importance of indigenous languages in promoting social cohesion, cultural preservation, and effective communication. Language policy reforms should aim to integrate indigenous languages into formal domains such as education, government, and media, ensuring a balance between English as a national and international language and the diverse linguistic heritage of Nigeria.

Recommendations

- i. Bilingual Education Policy: Introduce bilingual education programs that incorporate indigenous languages alongside English, especially in primary and secondary schools, to improve comprehension and learning outcomes.
- ii. Indigenous Language Use in Government: Revise language policies in government institutions to encourage the use of indigenous languages in public service delivery, particularly in rural areas, ensuring greater accessibility.
- iii. Expansion of Indigenous Languages in Media: Promote the inclusion of indigenous languages in print and digital media to balance the current English dominance and enhance access to information for all linguistic groups in Nigeria.
- iv. Revision of National Language Policy: Review and update Nigeria's language policy to reflect the multilingual realities of the country, promoting linguistic diversity in formal and informal sectors of society.

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