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EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE EDUCATION: A PANACEA FOR EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN ILORIN WEST SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN KWARA STATE

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Abstract
Language education is a cornerstone of cognitive growth, cultural preservation, and academic achievement, particularly in diverse communities like Ilorin West, Kwara State. Nigeria's multilingual environment presents both opportunities and challenges, as English remains the primary medium of instruction while numerous indigenous languages thrive within homes and communities. Evidence from national and local educational practices highlights that teaching children in their mother tongue during the early years significantly improves comprehension, literacy, and critical thinking skills. Recent government efforts, such as the 2022 National Language Policy promoting mother-tongue instruction in the foundational stages, underscore the importance of nurturing local languages alongside English. However, the journey toward effective language education faces persistent obstacles. Many schools struggle with inadequate teacher preparation, limited instructional materials, and hesitancy among parents and private institutions to adopt mother-tongue instruction. In Ilorin West, these issues are compounded by the area's rich linguistic mix, making implementation both complex and essential. A practical way forward lies in a balanced bilingual model that integrates local languages with English, ensuring cultural identity is preserved while students remain competitive globally. Strengthening teacher training, providing resources, and engaging community stakeholders are vital to achieving meaningful results. Effective language education, therefore, remains a powerful solution for improved learning outcomes and inclusive development in Ilorin West secondary schools.

Keywords: *Language Education, Mother-Tongue Instruction, Bilingual Learning*

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Introduction

Language education in Nigeria is much more than memorising vocabulary or grammar rules it is a powerful instrument for shaping how people think, learn, and interact. With more than 520 languages spoken nationwide including Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, and many minority tongues Nigeria's linguistic diversity is both a cultural treasure and an educational challenge. Yet, for decades, English has remained the dominant language of instruction, a colonial legacy that has gradually sidelined indigenous languages and left many pupils struggling to fully engage with schoolwork (The Nation, 2022). To address these concerns, the Federal Executive Council approved a National Language Policy in 2022. The policy mandates that the first six years of primary education be delivered in each child's mother tongue or the language of their immediate environment, while English is introduced gradually. This idea is not new. The historic Ife Primary Education Project, pioneered by Professor Babs Fafunwa, demonstrated that children taught in their native Yoruba language outperformed peers in every subject including English (The Nation, 2022).

Recent Nigerian research reinforces this evidence. Musa and Osa-Omoregie (2020) show that early instruction in a child's first language strengthens literacy, deepens comprehension, and supports Nigeria's commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 4 on inclusive education. They caution, however, that success depends on well-trained teachers, quality learning materials, and strong community participation. Alimi et al. (2023) found in Osun State that pupils taught in Yoruba scored markedly higher in both literacy and numeracy. Likewise, Aiyedun, Ogundairo, and Ajibola (2021) observed in Kwara State that students who learned science in their mother tongue outperformed those taught exclusively in English. In Anambra State, Bosah, Okika, and Anozie (2023) reported improved comprehension, retention, and overall academic achievement where mother-tongue teaching was adopted. Together, these studies affirm what many educators already believe: children learn best in the language they understand most naturally. Despite such evidence, the day-to-day reality is different. Many Nigerian schools especially urban and private institutions still rely almost entirely on English. Consequently, countless children who cannot fully follow English lessons either disengage or fall behind. Reports describe classrooms where pupils appear withdrawn or even fall asleep because they cannot grasp the teacher's explanations (The Nation, 2024). Scholars like Apakama and Agbedo (2024) stress that the challenge lies less in the policy itself and more in its implementation. Without adequate teacher preparation, locally relevant curricula, and culturally appropriate learning resources, mother-tongue education risks remaining a policy on paper.

There are also worries about language interference the fear that weak development in indigenous languages might hinder later English acquisition. Yet Agusiobo and Iloanwusi (2023) argue that targeted teacher training, school-level language support, and active parental involvement can effectively balance both local and global language skills. Importantly, Ogunyemi (2023) advocates a well-planned bilingual model: building a strong foundation in the mother tongue while introducing English systematically. Such an approach would enhance learning outcomes, preserve cultural heritage, foster social cohesion, and prepare students to compete in a global economy.

In essence, language education in Nigeria must go beyond a "one-size-fits-all" English-only model. A practical, well-resourced, multilingual policy valuing both indigenous languages and English is essential. By enabling every child to learn first in a familiar language and then expand into wider communication, Nigeria can nurture confident learners who are culturally rooted and globally equipped.

Main Focus

Nigeria must move beyond policy declarations and adopt a fully implemented, multilingual framework for language education. By integrating mother-tongue instruction, structured bilingual strategies, and English proficiency, the country can boost learning outcomes, safeguard cultural identity, and strengthen national unity.

National and Education Context

Language education in Nigeria operates in an exceptionally complex environment. With more than 500 indigenous languages spoken

nationwide, the classroom becomes both a learning arena and a space where cultural identity and national cohesion meet. While this linguistic wealth is a point of pride, it also poses one of the greatest challenges to effective teaching and learning (Inuwa-Dutse, 2025). English has long remained the official language of instruction, reflecting colonial legacies and creating tension between global communication needs and the preservation of Nigerian languages.

Multilingual Classrooms: Daily Realities

Nigeria's linguistic variety produces classrooms where teachers and pupils often juggle several languages to communicate and understand lessons. Studies reveal that many teachers rely on code-switching alternating between English and local languages to help students grasp key ideas (Jegede, 2024). Yet this is frequently insufficient. Nwankwo et al. (2023) observe that learners from non-English-speaking homes or rural backgrounds struggle under an English-dominated curriculum, while Effiong (2025) reports that over 70 percent of secondary students in Akwa Ibom State rarely use English at home, limiting their confidence and participation.

Teacher Preparation: A Critical Gap

A central obstacle to improving language education is inadequate teacher training. Adeniji and Ogunyemi (2024) note that many colleges of education lack funding and practical programmes to prepare teachers for linguistically diverse classrooms or bilingual instruction. Chinwe (2023) and Obi (2025) add that most teacher-education curricula offer little exposure to methods such as translanguaging, which could bridge comprehension gaps. Without continuous professional development, even well-designed policies remain difficult to enforce at the classroom level.

Insufficient Learning Resources

Shortages of instructional materials further undermine progress. Okon and Eze (2023) found that numerous schools lack up-to-date textbooks, language laboratories, and teaching aids. Large class sizes compound the challenge by limiting individual attention (Effiong, 2025). Even when resources are available, teachers may not be trained to use them effectively. For example, Okudo (2023) observed that many upper-basic Igbo language teachers in Lagos State lacked digital literacy, preventing meaningful integration of technology into lessons.

Digital Opportunities and the Divide

Despite these limitations, technology offers significant promise. Faloye and Deji-Afuye (2023) argue that digital tools can enhance teacher training and enrich language instruction. Their study in Ekiti State showed that while many lecturers were digitally aware, infrastructural support remained weak. Likewise, Anenechukwu and Eke (2024) highlight how virtual media can train teachers remotely, supply instructional resources, and support indigenous language learning in areas with few trained educators. Yet these gains depend on closing the digital divide: many rural schools still lack electricity, internet access, and teachers skilled in educational technology.

Translanguaging and Bilingual Strategies

Innovative pedagogies that reflect Nigeria's multilingual reality are increasingly recommended. Translanguaging, where teachers fluidly use both English and local languages, has been shown to boost comprehension and engagement. Jegede (2024) found that students in classrooms applying this strategy performed better and participated more actively. Similarly, Ezeudu (2020, cited in 2023) underscores the broader social value of bilingual education, noting its potential to foster national unity, respect for cultural diversity, and improved academic outcomes. Unfortunately, these approaches remain underused due to limited policy enforcement and teacher training.

Language, Culture, and the Risk of Loss

Language is more than a medium of instruction it is a vessel of culture. Concerns about the potential disappearance of some Nigerian languages have reignited debates over language policy. A 2024 report of a viral rumour predicting the extinction of Igbo sparked a wave of community-driven initiatives festivals, online courses, and cultural programmes aimed at preserving it (El País, 2024). Tijjani (2023) cautions that while promoting major languages such as Hausa is important, policies must remain inclusive and

sensitive to Nigeria's diversity to avoid deepening ethnic divisions.

The Role of Innovation and Educational Technology

Amid ongoing debates on language education, Nigerian technology innovators are providing practical, community-driven solutions. For instance, Opeifa (2025) and Olanrewaju (2022) have developed affordable digital platforms that deliver lessons and teacher training via SMS and mobile applications, ensuring access even in areas with weak internet coverage. Such grassroots initiatives illustrate how technology can make language education more inclusive, affordable, and sustainable across urban and rural contexts (Adebayo & Fagbohun, 2023).

Nigeria's language education system is at a pivotal moment. Persistent challenges including gaps in teacher preparation, limited instructional materials, and inconsistent policy implementation continue to hinder progress (Ogunleye & Adeola, 2022). Yet the opportunities are equally significant. Embracing digital tools, promoting bilingual teaching strategies, and investing in robust teacher development could transform Nigeria's vast linguistic diversity into a national asset. With decisive action from policymakers, educators, and innovators, language education can underpin academic achievement, cultural preservation, and national cohesion (Oyetade & Alimi, 2024).

Academic Benefits of Mother-Tongue Instruction

Recent Nigerian scholarship underscores that teaching children in their mother tongue is not merely a cultural preference but an educational imperative. In Osun State, Alimi et al. (2020) compared pupils taught literacy and numeracy in English with those taught in Yorùbá and found markedly higher comprehension and classroom confidence among the mother-tongue group. Teachers corroborate these findings, noting that pupils learn concepts more quickly and participate more actively when instruction is in a familiar language (Adewuyi & Ojo, 2021). Similar evidence emerged in Kwara State, where Aiyedun et al. (2023) revealed that pupils taught Basic Science in Yoruba consistently outperformed peers taught solely in English, regardless of gender. Their results strengthen the argument that the language of instruction should bridge rather than block learning. In Ekiti State, a 2024 study on secondary school students learning English showed that early mother-tongue instruction accounted for nearly one-third of the subsequent improvement in English proficiency (Adegbite & Kolawole, 2024). Far from delaying second-language acquisition, this approach provides a strong foundation for mastering English later, validating Cummins' interdependence theory (1981) within the Nigerian context.

Collectively, these studies confirm what many educators already intuit: when children first learn in the language of their homes, they develop deeper understanding, achieve stronger academic results, and transition more smoothly to English. Mother-tongue instruction, therefore, is not a step backward but a strategic investment in lifelong learning and national development (Ogunyemi & Falade, 2025).

Counterarguments and Rebuttal

Concerns about Global Competitiveness

A frequent objection to prioritising indigenous languages in Nigerian schools is the fear that doing so may reduce students' competitiveness in the global economy. Critics insist that English the language of higher education, technology, and international trade must remain dominant if Nigerian graduates are to excel internationally (Okonkwo & Odo, 2022). They point out that many learners already struggle with English proficiency, which affects their performance in English-medium examinations such as WAEC and NECO (Adegbite, 2020).

Another challenge is the cost and logistics of implementing mother-tongue instruction across Nigeria's 500+ languages. Numerous local languages still lack standard orthographies, subject-specific terminology, and approved instructional materials (Oyetunde, 2024). Opponents caution that these gaps could create curriculum inconsistencies, shortages of trained teachers, and additional expenditure on language resources. They argue that concentrating scarce funds on English-medium instruction might be more practical for a developing nation (Uzoegwu, 2023). There is also the perception that early emphasis on indigenous languages could delay

English acquisition, potentially disadvantaging learners in STEM disciplines where English remains the global language of scholarship (Okonkwo & Odo, 2022). These concerns capture the tension between preserving cultural identity and preparing students for worldwide competitiveness.

Evidence for a Balanced Multilingual Approach

First-Language Proficiency Strengthens Second-Language Learning

Empirical evidence consistently shows that learning first in one's mother tongue strengthens, rather than weakens, English acquisition. Alimi, Adegbite, and Oke (2020) demonstrated that Yoruba-medium instruction in early grades not only boosted literacy and numeracy but also enhanced later English performance. This supports Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis, which holds that skills in a first language transfer to a second. Follow-up analyses of the classic Ife Six-Year Primary Project confirm that pupils initially taught in Yoruba ultimately outperformed peers educated only in English when assessed in English (Fafunwa, 2020).

Bilingual Education Enhances Academic Outcomes

Recent Nigerian studies highlight the academic value of bilingual models. In Kwara State, Aiyedun, Oyeleke, and Adebayo (2023) found that pupils taught Basic Science through mother-tongue instruction surpassed those taught solely in English, later transitioning seamlessly to English-medium classes. Likewise, Ezeokoli and Ugwu (2021) reported broad support among parents and teachers in Oyo State for mother-tongue instruction, noting improvements in comprehension, class participation, and even English results.

Global Policy Alignment

Nigeria's emerging language policy aligns with UNESCO's (2022) endorsement of mother-tongue-based multilingual education. The Federal Government's 2022 directive for early-grade instruction in indigenous languages reflects this evidence-driven approach (FRN, 2021). Yusuf (2024) further notes that classroom code-switching alternating between English and local languages helps learners grasp complex concepts while improving English fluency.

Cultural Identity and Global Readiness Can Coexist

Language scholars such as Adegbite (2020) emphasise that preserving cultural identity need not hinder global competitiveness. Pupils grounded in their first language typically develop stronger critical-thinking and problem-solving abilities, which translate into faster English acquisition (Oyetunde, 2024; Uzoegwu, 2023). Far from competing with English, mother-tongue instruction provides the cognitive tools that make mastering English easier.

Addressing Implementation Challenges

Practical barriers, though real, are surmountable. New teacher-training initiatives and bilingual digital resources such as mobile apps for Yoruba and Igbo are already emerging (Yusuf, 2024). Okonkwo and Odo (2022) propose a phased rollout, beginning with Nigeria's three major languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) before expanding to others with adequate resources. Community involvement, local material development, and EdTech can reduce costs while maintaining English proficiency. Concerns about global competitiveness, implementation costs, and delayed English acquisition are understandable but not supported by current evidence. Nigerian and international research since 2020 shows that mother-tongue instruction strengthens English learning, raises academic performance, and promotes social inclusion. The way forward is a balanced multilingual policy that values both indigenous languages and English, enabling Nigeria to safeguard its cultural heritage while equipping learners to thrive in a globalised world.

Implications of Strengthening Language Education in Nigeria

Language education in Nigeria carries profound implications that reach far beyond classroom literacy. It is both an academic necessity and a nation-building tool, shaping how citizens communicate, preserve culture, and compete in a global economy. Understanding these

implications is crucial for crafting effective reforms.

National Development and Social Cohesion

Nigeria's multilingual landscape over 500 indigenous languages can be a unifying strength if properly managed. When children learn in their mother tongue during their foundational years, they develop cognitive and emotional ties to their culture while building transferable literacy skills (Alimi et al., 2020; Oyetunde, 2024). Such grounding fosters social inclusion and a stronger sense of national identity. Conversely, neglecting indigenous languages risks eroding cultural heritage and widening educational inequities, particularly for pupils in rural and marginalised communities (Ugwu, 2020).

Literacy and Academic Performance

Mother-tongue instruction is strongly linked to improved literacy rates and academic achievement. Research from Kwara and Osun States shows that pupils taught in their first language outperform peers taught solely in English, even in English proficiency tests later on (Aiyedun et al., 2023). These findings imply that expanding indigenous-language education is not a cultural luxury but a pragmatic strategy for raising national literacy and exam success.

Economic and Workforce Competitiveness

A solid literacy foundation enables learners to master English more efficiently, ensuring that global competitiveness is not sacrificed. Students who first learn in a familiar language acquire problem-solving and critical-thinking skills that accelerate second-language acquisition and STEM learning (Adegbite, 2020). Thus, robust mother-tongue education complements rather than competes with the economic goal of producing globally competitive graduates (Yusuf, 2024).

Policy and Governance Impact

The National Policy on Education (NPE) acknowledges mother-tongue instruction in early schooling, but weak implementation means its impact is limited (Ugwu, 2020). This gap illustrates the broader governance implication: without clear timelines, measurable targets, and budgetary allocations, even progressive policies remain aspirational. Policymakers must therefore translate policy intent into enforceable action.

Equity and Inclusion

Language is a social equaliser. Children taught in a language they understand are more engaged and less likely to drop out (Owojecho, 2020). Strengthening mother-tongue instruction can narrow the rural-urban education gap, empower minority language groups, and uphold linguistic rights enshrined in international conventions (UNESCO, 2022).

Research and Knowledge Creation

Sustainable reform depends on evidence. Nigeria currently lacks robust data on indigenous language retention, teacher readiness, and curriculum outcomes. Dedicated research hubs, supported by agencies like the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), are essential to inform policy adjustments and monitor progress (Inuwa-Dutse, 2025). In short, the implications of effective language education are multi-layered: preserving culture, improving literacy, strengthening national unity, and enhancing global competitiveness. Failing to act risks cultural loss, persistent illiteracy, and continued underperformance in international education benchmarks.

Recommendations for Action

Building on these implications, Nigeria can move from policy statements to measurable progress through coordinated reforms in four interconnected areas: policy development, teacher preparation, curriculum renewal, and research.

1. Policy Development and Funding

The Federal Ministry of Education should enforce the NPE's mother-tongue provisions with clear timelines and budget lines for teacher recruitment, textbook production, and language resource development (Ugwu, 2020). A phased strategy can begin with the three major languages Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba while creating frameworks for minority languages (Owojecho, 2020). Community participation is vital: grassroots organisations such as the Conference of Autochthonous Ethnic Nationalities Communities Development Associations

(CONAECDA) should help shape and monitor policy to ensure local relevance (CONAECDA, 2021).

2. Teacher Training and Incentives

Teacher preparation must pivot to multilingual pedagogy. Colleges of Education and universities should embed bilingual education courses and techniques like scaffolding and code-switching (Yusuf, 2024). Regular in-service workshops and digital training tools such as language-learning apps championed by innovators like Opeifa (2025) will keep practising teachers up to date. To motivate participation, government could provide language proficiency bonuses or career advancement credits for teachers proficient in indigenous languages.

3. Curriculum Reform and Technology Integration

Curriculum design should go beyond translating English materials. It should embed local culture, integrating folktales, proverbs, and indigenous histories to make lessons more relatable (NERDC, n.d.). Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) can allow core subjects like science and mathematics to be taught initially in local languages, with English gradually introduced (Ugwu, 2020). Technology is key: e-books, interactive videos, and offline learning platforms can bridge teacher shortages and expand access in low-connectivity areas (Anenechukwu & Eke, 2024).

4. Research, Monitoring, and Accountability

Nigeria needs dedicated language education research centres to collect data on literacy rates, student outcomes, and teacher readiness across both major and minority languages (Inuwa-Dutse, 2025). Annual public progress reports would create transparency and help policymakers refine strategies. Partnerships with community groups such as CONAECDA will ensure research captures ground realities and supports language revitalisation.

5. Sustainable Partnerships

Government alone cannot achieve these goals. Collaboration with private EdTech firms, NGOs, and international bodies like UNESCO will provide technical support, funding leverage, and global best practices for mother-tongue instruction (UNESCO, 2022).

Integrating the Recommendations into a Coherent Strategy

To achieve meaningful change in language education, the four key recommendations policy enforcement, teacher training, curriculum reform, and research must be woven into a single, coordinated national language strategy rather than treated as separate or ad hoc initiatives. The synergy among them will multiply impact; here's how such a strategy might be structured in practice, and how it can grow from pilot to scale.

Pilot Phase and Gradual Scaling

Start with the three major languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) as pilot zones. These languages already have more resources (spoken widely, some orthographic work done) and can serve as proof points. Use lessons from pilot phases to design frameworks for minority and under-represented languages, learning what works in teacher training, material development, resource allocation, and community engagement. Gradual scaling helps manage costs, avoid overwhelming systemic capacity, and ensures quality control in rollout.

Community Engagement & Localized Design

Establish Regional Language Committees in each state or cluster of states. These include local leaders, linguists, teachers, parents, and language experts. Their role is to ensure that policy decisions (like choice of orthography, local adaptions of curriculum content, choosing stories and texts) are culturally appropriate and accepted. Community participation ensures ownership, which improves uptake and sustainability. As studies show, local stakeholders generally support mother-tongue instruction and value its cultural relevance (Ezeokoli & Ugwu, 2021). Also, these committees can help monitor implementation on the ground, serve feedback roles, and help tailor interventions to different local circumstances (e.g., urban vs rural, multilingual communities).

Digital Language Hubs & Resource Creation

Invest in digital language hubs that bring together tech companies, universities, NGOs, and government agencies. These hubs will:

Develop digital resources (e-books, interactive apps, offline content) for languages with few existing teaching materials.

Maintain digital linguistic databases: for example, annotation of texts, orthographies, lexicons, audio-recordings of native speakers, etc.

Inuwa-Dutse's 2025 work (on "NaijaNLP") underlines the scarcity of computational linguistic resources even for major languages like Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, showing that much of the current work reuses older data rather than creating fresh linguistic resources. Digital tools can also assist teacher training (e-course modules, video demonstrations), especially in remote or low-connectivity settings (via offline capabilities or low-bandwidth materials).

Policy Enforcement + Feedback Loops

Clear policy instruments: laws/regulations, but also measurable targets and timelines. For instance, by Year 1: pilot states using mother-tongue instruction for lower primary; by Year 3: expanding to more states; by Year 5: full implementation in major languages and design frameworks for minority ones.

Budget allocation: ensure dedicated funding lines in education budgets for recruitment, training, materials, digital infrastructure.

Feedback and monitoring: establish regular monitoring cycles (annual or biannual) to assess teacher readiness, resource availability, curriculum use, student outcomes in both local languages and English. Use data to adjust policy, teacher training, resource development.

Integration Across the Four Pillars

Teacher training must be aligned with curriculum reform: the texts and pedagogical approaches developed in curriculum reform must become part of teacher preparation curricula and in-service training. Research centers must provide data that informs both policy enforcement and curriculum changes; they act as the glue binding the strategy. Digital hubs provide tools that help teachers, curriculum developers, and researchers collaborate and iterate.

Expected Outcomes

If this coherent, integrated strategy is implemented with fidelity, Nigeria can expect a number of transformative outcomes over time. These outcomes will not be instant but will accumulate as different parts of the system improve together.

Higher Literacy Rates

Because children learn in a language they understand, comprehension in early literacy and numeracy should improve. In rural and marginalized communities, where English exposure is limited, this should reduce early failure, reduce dropout rates, and strengthen learning foundations. Research in Nigeria has already shown that mother-tongue instruction in Basic Science and other subjects leads to higher academic achievement compared to English-only instruction in similar settings (Aiyedun, Ogundairo, & Ajibola, 2023).

Improved English Acquisition and Bilingual Competence

Rather than delaying English, strong foundations in mother tongue help learners transfer literacy skills (e.g., decoding, reading comprehension, vocabulary) to English more efficiently. As stakeholders in Oyo State believe, using the mother tongue strengthens both content comprehension and later English learning (Ezeokoli & Ugwu, 2021).

Cultural Preservation and Identity Reinforcement

The formal inclusion of local languages in schools will help preserve linguistic heritage. Languages currently under threat may have better prospects if curricula, literature, and digital archives exist. Recognition in formal education signals respect for cultural identities, which can enhance students' self-esteem and community pride.

Educational Equity and Access

Students from minority-language or rural backgrounds will no longer be disadvantaged by language mismatches between home and school. With localized materials and well-trained teachers, quality of instruction will improve across states, reducing disparities in educational outcomes. Communities that are often neglected in national policy will have a voice via regional committees and research-informed feedback loops.

Evidence-Based Policy and Continual Improvement

Monitoring systems (data on literacy, student outcomes, teacher preparedness, resource

distribution) will support making informed adjustments to strategies. Research centres, perhaps integrated with universities and NERDC, will help ensure policy isn't static but responsive to what works.

Strengthened National Unity and Social Cohesion

As children from diverse linguistic backgrounds see their languages valued, this can build mutual respect and understanding. Education that includes mother-tongue instruction can help mitigate tensions that arise when minority groups feel culturally or linguistically marginalised.

Greater Global Competitiveness

Well-rounded bilingual or multilingual individuals, confident both in their mother tongue and English, will be better positioned to engage in higher education, STEM fields, international business, and other domains where English is important. Digital literacy tools and partnerships (e.g., those supported by tech hubs or government-private sector collaboration) will help bridge technological divides, increasing the ability of learners to participate in a globalized, digital economy.

Supporting Evidence and Challenges

The study "Impact of using students' first language as medium of instruction on academic performance in elementary public and private schools in Nigeria" (2025) found that learners instructed in their first language (Yoruba, in this case) had significantly higher academic results than counterparts in English-medium private schools. This underscores the potential benefit of the first-language medium across sectors.

However, significant challenges persist: implementation gaps (many states do not enforce the mother-tongue policy in early primary) have been documented in Oyo State and others; government support in terms of trained teachers, materials, and monitoring has often been inadequate.

Putting all this together, a coherent national strategy for language education in Nigeria that integrates policy enforcement, teacher training, curriculum reform, and research supported by community engagement and digital hubs is not a luxury but a necessary investment. When well-implemented, it promises to lift literacy, strengthen English learning, preserve culture, ensure fairness, and improve global competitiveness. The key will be political will, sustained funding, genuine community involvement, and a willingness to monitor, evaluate, and adapt.

Conclusion

Language education in Nigeria is far more than a school subject; it is the lifeblood of learning, a bridge to cultural heritage, and a powerful instrument for social inclusion and national development. In a country with over 500 living languages, the challenge is not whether language education should be prioritised but how it can meet both local realities and global demands (Ugwu, 2020). For decades, English has dominated the classroom, creating a disconnect between pupils' home language and their school experience. This mismatch often results in poor comprehension, low participation, and high dropout rates, especially in rural areas where English is rarely spoken at home (Owojecho, 2020). Research consistently shows that mother-tongue instruction in the early years provides a strong cognitive foundation, improving literacy in the first language and accelerating second-language acquisition (Aiyedun, Oyeleke, & Adebayo, 2023).

A practical path forward is a multilingual education framework that begins with the learner's home language and gradually introduces English. By starting with what children already know, teachers can build a bridge to what they need to learn. Far from weakening English proficiency, this approach strengthens it by ensuring that basic literacy skills develop in a language the learner understands (Fafunwa, 2020). The classic Ife Six-Year Primary Education Project remains proof: pupils taught first in Yoruba not only performed better across subjects but also achieved higher levels of English proficiency in later years. Multilingual education also safeguards Nigeria's cultural heritage. Language is more than a medium of instruction; it carries history, identity, and collective memory. When a language disappears from the classroom, it risks disappearing from the community itself. Oyetunde (2024) stresses that revitalising indigenous languages through formal schooling

nurtures cultural pride and strengthens national unity by giving every linguistic group recognition and belonging. The social implications are equally profound. Nigeria's linguistic diversity, if harnessed, can become a tool for inclusion rather than division. Integrating local languages into the education system dismantles barriers that marginalise non-English-speaking communities. Uzoegwu (2023) observes that when children learn in a familiar language, their confidence grows, participation improves, and chances of academic success multiply. This inclusivity benefits individuals while reinforcing the social fabric and reducing inequalities tied to language.

Despite these clear benefits, the gap between policy and practice remains wide. The National Policy on Education (FRN, 2021) endorses mother-tongue instruction, yet implementation is inconsistent because of weak funding, inadequate teacher preparation, and the scarcity of instructional materials in indigenous languages (Ugwu & Ogunremi, 2021). Closing this gap requires a co-ordinated, well-funded national strategy that matches rhetoric with action. Teacher training is particularly pivotal. As Yusuf (2024) points out, many educators lack both the linguistic competence and pedagogical skills to teach effectively in multiple languages. Without major investment in teacher-preparation programmes covering bilingual methods, code-switching strategies, and culturally responsive pedagogy policy reforms will remain aspirational. Alongside training, Nigeria needs culturally relevant, technology-driven learning resources. Anenechukwu and Eke (2024) emphasise that digital and interactive materials make language instruction more engaging and effective for 21st-century classrooms. Equally important is research and monitoring. Establishing regional language-education research centres would provide evidence on literacy outcomes, teacher readiness, and the real impact of multilingual education (Owojecho, 2020). Such data-driven oversight would keep policy dynamic and responsive, avoiding the stagnation that comes from outdated assumptions.

The consequences of inaction are serious. Continued neglect of indigenous language instruction will perpetuate educational inequality, hasten the erosion of Nigeria's linguistic heritage, and limit the cognitive development of millions of learners. Conversely, a robust multilingual education policy offers a triple dividend: stronger academic performance, cultural preservation, and enhanced social integration. Achieving this transformation demands political will. As Ugwu (2020) argues, language-education reform cannot be left to educators or linguists alone; it must become a matter of national priority, backed by legislation, adequate funding, and continuous monitoring. Policymakers, educators, parents, and local communities must collaborate to ensure that language is no longer a barrier but a bridge to learning and opportunity.

Ultimately, Nigeria's linguistic diversity is not a problem to solve but a resource to cultivate. By embracing a multilingual framework, the nation can prepare its learners for a globalised world while staying rooted in its cultural identity. Fafunwa (2020) captured it well: "Education in the language of the child is education for the mind, while education in an unfamiliar language is education for the memory." To truly educate the mind, Nigeria must invest in language education that begins where every child's learning journey naturally starts the language of home. The era of rhetorical commitment has passed. What is now required is decisive action: enforce existing policies, train teachers, invest in indigenous language materials, leverage technology, and adopt research-driven solutions. If Nigeria succeeds in bridging the gap between policy and classroom practice, it will not only transform its schools but also lay the foundation for a more literate, culturally vibrant, and globally competitive nation.

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