

RETHINKING THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION

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Abstract

Nigeria is a linguistically diverse country, with over 500 languages spoken nationwide. The official language is English, and it is also the language of instruction in most schools. However, majority of pupils whose first language is not English do not have access to education in a language that they neither speak nor understand. This therefore creates a barrier to learning and affects the ability to learn effectively. As language plays a crucial role in learning, there is increasing evidence to rethink its role in education. Mother tongue language-based education is a crucial factor for inclusion and quality learning, and it also improves learning outcomes and academic performance. This is critical at primary level to avoid knowledge gaps, increase the speed of learning and comprehension. There have been efforts to promote mother tongue education in Nigeria. In 2004, the government launched the National Policy on Education, which states that "*the medium of instruction in the primary school shall be initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community.*" The NPE stipulated the introduction of English as a subject in primary schools to ensure that learners are bilingual. This was followed by the National Language Policy in 2022 which makes mother tongue a compulsory medium of instruction for primary schools. The policy stipulated that mother tongue is exclusively for the first six years of education, while it will be combined with English Language from Junior Secondary School. However, the implementation of mother tongue education in Nigeria faces several challenges, including a lack of trained teachers who can teach in local languages, inadequate teaching and learning materials in local languages, and limited support from parents and communities. Additionally, there are concerns about the standardization of local languages and the potential impact of mother tongue education on the acquisition of English language skills. Nonetheless, there is growing recognition of the importance of mother tongue education in Nigeria, and efforts are being made to overcome the challenges and promote its implementation. This paper will look at research conducted in Nigeria on language practices in primary classrooms and consequences on learning outcomes, and how stakeholders including Partnership for Learning for All in Nigerian Education (PLANE) is supporting the government to drive the implementation of National Language Policy.

Introduction

The Federal Republic of Nigeria is Africa's most populous nation. The World Bank estimates its 2017 population to be 191 million people, with one of the largest youth populations in the world. The country is also home to more languages than any other African nation. Ethnologue lists 526 languages in Nigeria; other estimates place the number between 500 and 600, though the lack of current census data on the nation's languages hinders a more accurate count. The three major language families found in Africa (Afro-Asiatic, Nilo-Saharan and Niger-Congo) are all represented among Nigerian languages. Language community sizes range from a few thousand speakers to

more than 48 million speakers. As the most linguistically rich nation in Africa, Nigeria is also a highly multilingual society. The degree of multilingualism is highest in urban areas and the linguistically very diverse southern states, as well as in the states of the North Central zone. However, even in the North East and North West zones where Hausa is seen to be the dominant language, Kaduna, Bauchi, Gombe and Borno and Adamawa states are home to dozens of smaller languages. Nigerians rightly see themselves as a multilingual people, and their attachment to their ethnic languages can be very strong. Multilingualism with English, on the other hand, is less common. While the

country's elites are both highly fluent in, and strongly supportive of, the English language (Adegbite, 2003), English fluency is much less strong among other sectors of the Nigerian population.

Formalised national language policy has been limited to a series of language provisions, found in the Nigerian Constitution and the National Policy on Education (NPE). The brevity of the language provisions in the Constitution, and the lack of national level statements on language use outside the realm of education, have resulted in a vague national policy environment on the use of language in critical areas such as governance, health and legal institutions, the military, the workplace and public spaces (Spolsky, 2009).. The language provisions suffer from a lack of internal consistency within the NPE, making them difficult to implement with fidelity (for example, comparing sections 1.8 and 2.2 in the 2013 NPE; see Table 1). Changes in the language provisions from one version of the NPE to the next have not been accompanied by clear rationales, nor by guidelines for implementation of the new policy. Mbah (2012: 53) notes that this situation results in a de facto language policy environment rather than a de jure one. Adegbija (2004: 181) discusses this language policy paradox in Nigeria. In view of this, the Nigerian government has approved a new National Language Policy which makes the mother tongue a compulsory medium of instruction from Primary 1 to 6. The objective of this policy is to promote and enhance the cultivation and use of all Nigerian languages. The policy starts from 2022 and the use of mother tongue is exclusive, but there is the urgent need to develop the material, get the teachers trained .Since the first six years of school should be in the mother tongue where the pupil is, the language of the host community is what will be used

Literature Review

In recent years, several literacy frameworks have gained traction in the international development community. Richard Allington's "6 Ts of Reading Instruction" recommend ample time for reading instruction; texts that

align to children's reading levels and interests; teaching that model explicit cognitive strategies used by successful readers; talk between teachers and learners that engages learners' comprehension skills; tasks that actively engaged learners; and testing that evaluated learners' work and emphasized improvement over raw achievement. A second prevalent framework is the 5 Components of Reading Instruction, which emerged from a meta-analysis published in 2000. This framework provides a more granular view of key instructional areas. The analysis found that five instructional areas have the greatest evidence of impact on reading outcomes: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Reading Panel and National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). This framework laid the foundation for the Early Grade Reading and Early Grade Math Assessments (EGRA/EGMA), which has been used in over 65 countries and over 100 languages to assess children's progress in reading (Dubeck and Gove, 2015).

Reading and mother tongue education are closely linked and can have a significant impact on each other. There is a strong research consensus that instruction in children's first language (L1) improves learning outcomes across the curriculum, including local language literacy, English literacy, and mathematics (World Bank 2021). For example, learning to read and write in one's mother tongue forms the foundation for literacy development. Also, children who are initially taught to read in their mother tongue have a better understanding of language structures, vocabulary, and phonetics, which can contribute to their overall literacy skills. When students receive education in their mother tongue, they are more likely to comprehend and understand the content they are reading. Reading comprehension is crucial for academic success, and it is easier to develop this skill when learners can access information and texts in a language, they are proficient in. Further, mother tongue education supports the development of language skills, including reading. When children are exposed to rich and diverse language

experiences in their mother tongue, they are more likely to acquire advanced vocabulary, sentence structures, and reading strategies. This, in turn, can facilitate the transfer of reading skills to other languages, including English.

Although concerns have been raised on the ability of children who learn in L1 to learn in another language, it has been shown that proficiency in the mother tongue can serve as a bridge to learning a second language, such as English. When students have a strong foundation in their mother tongue, they can transfer literacy skills, vocabulary, and language knowledge to the learning of a new language. This can enhance their second language learning abilities and accelerate their progress in English or other languages.

In spite of the foregoing benefits of mother tongue instruction, there have been challenges with respect to the use of mother tongue instructions. One of which is the inadequate implementation of the relevant policies. Nigeria's National Policy on Education states that all children in the early primary grades should be taught in the language of their immediate environment (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013), yet schools lack the resources to adequately implement this policy. Roughly 40% of children have access to English and math textbooks, but only about 13% of children have access to local language textbooks (NPC & RTI International, 2016). Supplementary materials, which are essential for deepening learners' skills, are even scarcer. A recent study found no local language supplementary materials available for Nigerian children reading at the level of 0-10 words per minute (RTI International, 2016). Local language instruction also requires proper attention to the language structure, particularly for literacy classes. Unfortunately, there is limited rigorous research on literacy instruction in non-English languages (Share, 2008). Evidence-based practices for English literacy instruction, such as emphasis on phonemic awareness and sight words, may be less relevant to non-English languages, because English relies on an unusually complex orthography (Share 2008; Seymour, Aro & Erskine, 2003). Meanwhile, practices that are

common in African classrooms, such as teaching in syllable sets (e.g, ka ke ki ko ku), are given inadequate attention in the literature or are rejected by English-speaking practitioners (Trudell & Schroeder, 2007). However, emerging research indicates that instruction in syllable sets for some African languages can actually yield higher results than phonetic approaches (Piper & Van Ginkel, 2016; Asfaha, Kurvers & Kroon 2008). A randomized controlled trial conducted under the FCDO-funded Reading and Numeracy Activity (RANA) compared a syllabic approach and alphabetic approach to Hausa literacy instruction. The study found that the percent of children who couldn't read a single word in Hausa dropped by 30% with alphabetic instruction and by 45% with syllabic instruction, indicating that syllabic instruction may be more effective.

In addition to proper local language instruction, the way that teaching and learning materials reflect local culture is important for several reasons. Research indicates that teachers are more likely to use materials that they understand immediately rather than those for which they would need time and energy to learn how to use or incorporate into their lessons (Titone, et al., 2012). Given the fact that some instructional approaches in educational programming will likely be new to teachers, creating and using culturally responsive materials ensures that there will be one less barrier to successful implementation. Moreover, students learn more quickly when they make connections between "home and school knowledge" (Grassi & Barker, 2010). When materials include examples, stories, and manipulatives that they already come into contact with outside of school, they can focus solely on the concept being taught, rather than trying to situate that new knowledge within an unfamiliar context.

Review of Donor Programmes on Language Intervention in Education.

Nigeria has been working to improve reading skills in primary schools for over a decade. Specifically, Federal and State partners have been working with development

partners to pilot reading programs in primary 1 to primary 3. This section highlights some of these programs and their contribution to mother tongue education:

Teacher Development Programme (TDP), 2013–18
Location: Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina and Zamfara states
International implementer: Mott MacDonald
Funder: DFID
Languages: Hausa, English
The goal of the TDP is to improve the quality of teaching in primary schools and junior secondary schools and in colleges of education at the state level in northern Nigeria. The TDP aims to improve the skills of 66,000 teachers, including their language-teaching skills. The TDP's scope covers key subjects such as English, mathematics and science. The Strengthening Teachers' English Proficiency in Northern Nigeria (STEPIN) programme, designed by the British Council, was implemented from December 2015 to July 2018 as a component of the TDP. STEPIN was designed to meet the need of teachers in Northern Nigeria who have to provide English-medium instruction from P4 onwards, but who do not have adequate English language proficiency to do so. The programme was intended specifically to improve the English language proficiency, classroom English and teaching methodology of 62,000 teachers. The programme offered a self-study course in English language, supported by peer mentoring groups. Periodic English forums for teachers were established at each target school. The TDP has also provided support for in-service reform. Latterly, the TDP has developed teaching and learning tools for students and teachers in Hausa. Overall, the TDP has been effective by a wide range of stakeholders; it has also had a positive impact on teacher performance. However, overcoming the key issues of teachers limited subject knowledge and teacher absenteeism has been extremely difficult, as has improving student learning.

Northern Education Initiative Plus (NEI Plus), 2015–2020
Location: Bauchi and Sokoto states
international implementer: Creative Associates
Funder: USAID
Language: Hausa, English
NEI Plus aims to strengthen the

ability of Bauchi and Sokoto states to provide greater access to basic education, especially for girls and out-of-schoolchildren. The project aims to significantly improve reading outcomes among more than one million children in schools, as well as more than 400,000 out-of-school children in approximately 11,000 learning centres. The project's Hausa- and English-language Mu Karanta! and Let's Read! programme has been designed as a mother-tongue based early reading programme for P1–P3 (Mu Karanta!), with transition to English-language reading in P2 and P3 (Let's Read!). The programme follows global best practices in learning to read in mother tongue and early-exit transition to English-medium learning. NEI Plus is also collaborating with the NERDC and the National Commission for Colleges of Education to develop a national reading framework, which will provide guidelines for teaching reading pedagogy in teachers' pre-service training. The project is actively equipping colleges of education to teach early-grade reading concept and pedagogical techniques. The project strategy further includes strengthening technical and administrative capacity, as well as accountability, among federal, state and local government education authorities. NEI Plus aims to address systemic challenges, including language-based constraints, in collaboration with government and other partners. For example, the project will gather evidence to determine whether the transition to English in P4 is an effective strategy, and then help to develop a policy on transition to English based on global and local evidence. For more information on this project, see

The Reading and Numeracy Activity (RANA)-

In collaboration with Nigeria's Ministry of Education and affiliated agencies in Nigeria's northern states of Katsina and Zamfara, the project implemented the Reading and Numeracy Activity (RANA) pilot project. Funded by the Department for International Development through the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the project aimed to improve the quality of literacy and numeracy instruction for girls and boys in primary grades 1–3 in

approximately 200 schools in the two states. These schools and states formed a subset of UNICEF's Girls' Education Project Phase 3 (GEP3), the impact of which RANA expects to enhance by using gender-sensitive methodologies in four major components of the education system: teacher professional development, teaching and learning materials, involved communities and sustainable government ownership.

Using its Hausa-based early grade reading approach, which integrates numeracy and gender themes into its materials, RANA built the capacity of over of 600 teachers to implement effective instruction and assessments. The project engaged local communities to build support for early grade reading and engaged in policy dialogue and capacity building with the government to build local ownership and assist both state governments in identifying strategies for pilot scale-up. Through RANA's integrated literacy and numeracy approach, and its commitment to collaboration with local stakeholders, the project supported a scalable, improved system for early grade reading and numeracy across Katsina and Zamfara.

Addressing Education in Northeast Nigeria (AENN)

The USAID-funded Addressing Education in Northeast Nigeria (AENN) aimed to provide education to children and youth in northeast Nigeria who were displaced, and to children in host communities. Key interventions include providing safe, accelerated learning opportunities in nonformal learning centres; promoting high-quality instruction in formal schools in host communities; working with government stakeholders to improve nonformal education policies and management; developing and implementing processes for mainstreaming learners from nonformal into formal institutions; and mobilizing communities to support education and school safety. During COVID-19 lockdowns, AENN rapidly developed and broadcast interactive radio lessons, and set up phone trees for caregivers to support and monitor home learning. Instruction under this programme was based on global learning frameworks for literacy and mathematics,

as well as principles of accelerated education. Language was aligned to the national curriculum, with local language (Hausa/Kanuri) at the basic level and English at the post-basic level. Further, materials are contextualized for Nigeria, although some examples are based on northwest rather than northeast Nigeria.

Overall lesson plan structure is clear: Warm-up, Learn, Practice, Share. This is a flexible structure that is easy for low-skilled teachers to follow while still allowing freedom and adaptability.

The nonformal sector is notoriously underfunded. Printing the number of books required will be a challenge without implementing partner support.

FCDO funded PLANE

PLANE Window 1 focuses on "Getting the Foundations Right – A Systems Approach," and seeks to promote more focused teaching and learning, improved governance in the state and nonstate sector, and increased use of data and evidence (PLANE TOR, p 3). Window 1 Output 1 focuses specifically on evidence-based teaching and learning approaches and materials in use in better managed schools and colleges. Under Output 1, PLANE will strengthen foundational learning opportunities from Grades 1 through 6, working strategically with government partners. PLANE Foundational Learning is the backbone of the Output 1 approach, beginning with Primary 1 and extending upward to Primary 6. This approach is supported by research, which consistently shows the importance of early intervention in reading and mathematics. Foundational Learning will work with the existing education system, including the primary school cycle and national curriculum, to help learners acquire foundational skills on schedule. The Lower Primary Foundational Learning Intervention Package (4 interventions) will support the state governments of Kano, Kaduna and Jigawa to reach their goals for improving primary education in 17 LGAs.

This intervention is aligned to evidence which shows language of instruction is Hausa, in line with global

consensus that instruction in a child's first language improves learning outcomes (World Bank 2021). This also aligns with the Nigerian policy on mother tongue education. Daily lessons are guided by learner books and evidence-based teacher guides (USAID, 2019; Piper et al., 2018). Further, literacy instruction is based on the Five Components of Reading Instruction (NICHHD, 2000) plus writing and oral language; literacy instruction is tailored to the syllabic structure of Hausa and harmonized with the Nigerian National Curriculum. While math instruction is based on globally accepted domains of mathematics (Lindquist, Philpot, Mullis, Cotter, 2019) and harmonized with the Nigerian National Curriculum.

Way forward

There are great examples within the country and outside where Nigeria can build on. Starting from the implementation of the National Reading Framework. This gives the framework for the implementation of reading – which forms the backbone of learning in Nigeria. This step is one linked to policy support from the government, state, and local levels. It also forms the step of many in scaling up interventions led by the government and development partners.

The next step looks at designing and implementing curriculum frameworks that include mother tongue education is essential. This will involve the continued and collective effort of all in creating age-appropriate and culturally relevant materials and resources that can be used in classrooms. As such, collaboration between education experts, linguists, and community representatives is vital for effective curriculum development. Similarly, there is a need to continue providing professional development opportunities for teachers to enhance their skills in teaching in the mother tongue. Training programs can focus on language proficiency, instructional strategies, and the development of culturally responsive pedagogies. Mentoring and ongoing support for teachers can also be beneficial. Further, ensuring adequate resources, such as textbooks, learning materials, and technology, is important

for the implementation of mother tongue education. Governments and education authorities need to allocate sufficient funds and resources to support the development and distribution of materials in different mother tongues.

Lastly, there is the need for Nigeria to continue to tell our stories – stories of what we have done, feats we have achieved and the impact of our work. One way we can achieve that is by conducting research and evaluation studies on the impact of mother tongue education. This will provide evidence of its benefits and inform policy and practice.

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