

**Language Policy and Planning in Nigeria: Challenges and Opportunities for Promoting
Indigenous Languages in The Face of English Language Hegemony**

Rosemary Oluchi Ananti

Department of English Language and Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University
Awka, Nigeria
Phone: +2348164558850
Email: fincy60@gmail.com

Abstract

Nigeria's linguistic landscape features over 500 indigenous languages yet remains dominated by English—a colonial legacy sustained through education, governance, and media (60 million speakers). Despite policies like the NPE (1977, revised 2004) and the 2006 Language Policy promoting mother-tongue instruction in early schooling, implementation is weak due to insufficient materials, teacher shortages, and inconsistent enforcement. English hegemony persists, reinforced by societal attitudes linking it to modernity and socioeconomic opportunity. Indigenous languages face marginalization, intergenerational language shift, and risk of extinction. Nevertheless, grassroots movements, digital tools, and supportive NGOs are fostering revitalization efforts. This study advocates stronger policy enforcement, resource provision, and community engagement to preserve Nigeria's multilingual heritage.

Keywords: Language Policy, Language Planning, English Language Hegemony, Indigenous Language Challenges, Opportunities for Indigenous Promotion

Introduction

Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a key component of cultural identity, social integration, and national development. In multilingual societies like Nigeria—widely regarded as one of the most linguistically diverse nations in the world, with over 500 indigenous languages (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2023)—the need for inclusive and effective language policy and planning is both urgent and complex. Despite this linguistic richness, Nigeria has continued to prioritize English as its official language, a legacy of British colonial rule (Bamgbose, 1991; Adegbiya, 2004). English dominates all formal sectors, including education, governance, media, and commerce, and is widely perceived as a marker of modernity, social mobility, and national unity (Igboanusi & Lothar, 2005; Ajayi, 2015).

While the adoption of English has facilitated interethnic communication and global integration, it has simultaneously marginalized indigenous languages and weakened their societal roles. This situation exemplifies what Phillipson (1992) terms linguistic imperialism, where dominant global languages, often introduced through colonialism, continue to suppress local

languages in postcolonial contexts. In Nigeria, this imbalance is evident in the education system, where English is the primary medium of instruction from early childhood, despite policy recommendations that indigenous languages be used at the foundational level (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). Numerous studies have shown that children learn best when taught in their mother tongue, particularly in the early years of schooling (UNESCO, 2003; Bamgbose, 2000), yet the implementation of mother-tongue education remains sporadic and ineffective.

Efforts to promote major Nigerian languages—Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba—have been made through official policy frameworks, such as the National Policy on Education. However, these efforts are undermined by weak institutional support, poor teacher training, lack of teaching materials, and prevailing societal attitudes that devalue indigenous languages (Owolabi & Dada, 2012; Ndimele, 2016). As a result, indigenous languages are rapidly losing prestige and practical value, especially among urban youth, who increasingly favor English or Nigerian Pidgin in daily communication (Igboanusi, 2008). The intergenerational transmission of many local

languages is in decline, posing risks of language endangerment and cultural erosion (Ushie, 2020; UNESCO, 2011).

This study explores the challenges and opportunities involved in promoting indigenous languages in Nigeria within the context of English language hegemony. It critically examines existing language policy and planning frameworks, assesses the socio-political and economic factors that hinder effective implementation, and considers viable strategies for revitalizing indigenous languages in education, governance, and community life. By drawing on theoretical perspectives from language planning (Cooper, 1989; Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997) and sociolinguistics (Fishman, 1991), this research seeks to offer practical insights for developing inclusive language policies that reflect Nigeria's multilingual reality and support cultural sustainability, educational equity, and national unity.

Language policy and planning in Nigeria

Language policy and planning in Nigeria refer to the deliberate decisions and efforts by the government and institutions to manage language use within its multilingual and culturally diverse society. Nigeria, with over 500 languages spoken across its six geopolitical zones (Ethnologue, 2024), faces

significant challenges in creating and implementing effective language policies that balance national integration with the preservation of linguistic diversity.

Language policy encompasses the laws, regulations, and practices a government adopts to influence which languages are recognized, promoted, or restricted in various domains such as education, administration, media, and the judiciary. According to Spolsky (2004), language policy involves “all the explicit and implicit decisions made about language use and language education within a particular community or society.” Language planning, as a subset of language policy, is the conscious effort by institutions to influence the function, structure, or acquisition of languages. Crystal (1987) describes it as a “deliberate attempt to influence language behavior.”

Language planning is generally divided into three categories:

1. Status planning – determining the roles of languages in society (e.g., official or regional languages).
2. Corpus planning – focusing on the development of linguistic resources such as standard grammar, orthography, and vocabulary.

3. Acquisition planning – promoting the learning and dissemination of languages (Robert & Richard, 1997).

In Nigeria, language policy is enshrined in several key documents, including the 1999 Constitution, the National Policy on Education (NPE), and other regulatory frameworks. English, the colonial legacy language, remains the official language, used in government, business, education, and legal systems (Adegbija, 2004). It serves as a unifying medium of communication among Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups but also contributes to the marginalization of indigenous languages. The National Policy on Education (NPE), first introduced in 1977 and revised in 1981, 1998, and 2004, is Nigeria's most significant attempt at language planning. It advocates for the mother tongue or language of the immediate environment to be used as the medium of instruction in the first three years of primary education. From the fourth year onward, English becomes the primary language of instruction (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). This model reflects a transitional bilingual education strategy, aimed at grounding children in their local languages before introducing English. Despite the progressive vision of the NPE, its implementation remains inconsistent and

largely ineffective. Many urban schools, both public and private, continue to adopt English as the sole medium of instruction, even at early educational stages (Bamgbose, 1991). This is often due to societal perceptions that equate indigenous languages with lack of sophistication, backwardness, or rural identity (Igboanusi, 2008). Furthermore, the lack of adequate teaching materials, insufficient teacher training in indigenous languages, and the absence of unified orthographies for many Nigerian languages further hinder the realization of the policy's goals (Oyetade, 2003). The issue of language planning in Nigeria also touches on the politics of national identity and unity. While the use of English facilitates communication across ethnic lines, it inadvertently undermines the role of local languages in national development. Efforts to develop national languages from the major indigenous languages—Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo—have not yielded significant results due to ethnic tensions, political rivalry, and resistance from minority language communities who fear marginalization (Bamgbose, 2000).

Moreover, corpus planning has seen limited success in Nigeria. Standardization efforts for languages like Yoruba and Hausa have made some progress in developing

instructional materials and media content. However, many other Nigerian languages remain underdeveloped and lack the necessary linguistic infrastructure to support literacy, education, or formal communication (Eka, 2000).

In terms of acquisition planning, while the NPE mandates that students in junior secondary schools must study one major Nigerian language other than their mother tongue, the practical enforcement of this provision is weak. Students and schools often opt out due to lack of interest, inadequate staffing, and logistical difficulties (Igboanusi & Lothar, 2005).

Historical background of language policy and planning in Nigeria

The historical background of language policy and planning in Nigeria reveals the colonial legacy of English language dominance and the marginalization of indigenous languages. British colonial rule in the early 20th century institutionalized English as the language of administration, education, and governance, marginalizing indigenous languages and promoting English as a language of civilization and progress (Bamgbose, 1991). This colonial language ideology resulted in English being associated with elitism and upward mobility, while indigenous languages were devalued,

disrupting indigenous knowledge systems, weakening traditional communication channels, and devaluing local cultural expressions.

After gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria recognized its linguistic diversity and introduced the National Policy on Education in 1977, which emphasized mother tongue education during the first three years of primary education (Bamigbose, 2000). However, challenges in implementing this policy persist due to the dominance of English in standard examinations and the lack of support for indigenous languages. Ngũgĩ (1986) critiqued the linguistic consequences of colonialism, arguing that language is not just a means of communication but a vehicle for culture, memory, and identity, and by imposing European languages, colonialism disrupted African cultural continuity.

English language hegemony in Nigeria

Language hegemony refers to the dominance and influence of one language over others in a particular context or region, often leading to the marginalization or suppression of minority languages. It can be seen in various aspects of society, such as education, media, and government policies. The hegemony of the English language in Nigeria is rooted in the country's colonial

history and continues to shape its sociolinguistic, educational, and political landscape. Introduced during British colonial rule in the early 20th century, English was institutionalized as the language of administration, education, and governance. Indigenous languages were systematically marginalized and deemed inferior, while English was promoted as a symbol of civilization, modernity, and progress (Bamgbose, 1991). Educational policies during the colonial period explicitly favored English, excluding local languages from formal instruction and bureaucratic functions.

This colonial language ideology had far-reaching implications. English became associated with elitism, social mobility, and access to power, while indigenous languages were relegated to informal domains and seen as obstacles to progress (Ngũgĩ, 1986). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, in *Decolonising the Mind*, argued that language is a carrier of culture, identity, and history. He maintained that the imposition of colonial languages like English disrupted African cultural continuity and devalued indigenous knowledge systems.

Following Nigeria's independence in 1960, efforts were made to address the imbalance through language policy reforms. The

National Policy on Education (1977) recommended mother tongue instruction for the first three years of primary school, transitioning to English in subsequent years. However, implementation has been weak due to the continued dominance of English in high-stakes domains such as standardized testing, official documentation, and higher education (Bamgbose, 2000). English has since maintained its dominance as Nigeria's official language and lingua franca, enabling interethnic communication across the country's more than 500 languages. While it serves a unifying function and facilitates national governance, this dominance also reinforces linguistic inequality. The hegemony of English is not merely linguistic but ideological — it perpetuates the notion that proficiency in English is essential for success, upward mobility, and modernity (Igboanusi, 2008). As a result, indigenous languages face continued marginalization, particularly in urban areas and elite institutions. English monopolizes education, media, governance, and economic discourse, thus displacing local languages from domains of prestige and reducing their intergenerational transmission (Adegbija, 2004). The continued privileging of English in policy-making, law, and commerce reflects the enduring colonial legacy that

positions English as the language of authority and advancement. The use of English in official settings, including courts, parliaments, and universities, has rendered local languages functionally irrelevant in these domains. Over time, the prestige attached to English has grown, contributing to what sociolinguists describe as “linguistic imperialism,” where one language dominates and suppresses the development of others (Phillipson, 1992).

According to Awonusi in Mustapha in Akujobi (2019),

Hegemony with relation to language connotes a fairly complex interplay of a number of variables such as power (socioeconomic power of its users), control (how the powerful users of a particular language use it as a weapon of linguistic domination of communities especially those that are multilingual or multicultural), legitimacy (the dependence on a language as the basis of social and political acceptance) and influence (the exercise of power – oftentimes in its coercive form and, sometimes, diplomacy such that the influence of a language is enhanced either from policies such as those of expansionism on the one hand or those of socio-political co-operation on the other hand.

This description appeals to the situation of English in Nigeria, which locks horns with the indigenous languages, some gearing towards extinction. The English language

has assumed a favourable position in the Nigerian society (Akujobi, 2019).

English language hegemony in Nigeria is influenced by socio-political and economic factors, as well as the widespread perception of English as a language of opportunity and power due to globalization. Despite the dominance of English, Nigeria is rich in indigenous languages belonging to various language families, each carrying unique cultural heritage. While major languages like Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo are prominent, there are numerous minority languages facing the risk of extinction, each holding valuable cultural knowledge. Indigenous languages not only serve as communication tools but also as repositories of cultural values and communal memory, essential for expressing traditional knowledge and preserving cultural identity. The preservation of indigenous languages is crucial for safeguarding Nigeria's cultural diversity and promoting social cohesion within communities. (UNESCO, 2003)

Indigenous Languages

Indigenous languages are not just communication tools but also repositories of cultural values and communal memory. These languages shape thought, encode societal norms, and pass on intergenerational wisdom. Preserving local languages is vital

for safeguarding Nigeria's cultural diversity and expressing traditional knowledge, values, and worldviews essential for cultural identity and community cohesion. When children are deprived of their mother tongues, they lose access to traditional stories, idioms, and oral literature that define their ethnic identity. Moreover, the weakening of local languages undermines social cohesion and intergenerational bonding within communities (UNESCO, 2003). Language preservation, therefore, is not only a linguistic concern but a cultural imperative.

Challenges in promoting the indigenous languages in Nigeria

The linguistic diversity in Nigeria poses significant challenges for communication, education, and governance, and addressing these challenges is crucial for promoting social cohesion, national unity, and effective governance in the country.

Nigeria is a country with over 500 different ethnic groups and over 500 different languages (Suleiman, 2018). The linguistic diversity in Nigeria presents several challenges, especially in terms of communication, education, and governance. One of the major challenges is the lack of a common language that can be used for

official communication. This language barrier affects communication between different ethnic groups and can hinder social cohesion and national unity (Idowu, 2016). In addition, the lack of a common language for education means that many children in Nigeria are not able to access quality education in their mother tongue, which can affect their academic performance and overall development (Ekiugbo, 2013). Furthermore, the language challenges in Nigeria also impact governance and public administration. Many government documents and official communications are only available in English, which excludes a large segment of the population who are not proficient in the language (Achi, 2017).

Linguistics imperialism

This paper hinges on the theory of linguistic imperialism by Robert Phillipson.

Linguistic imperialism refers to the dominance of one language over others, often leading to the suppression or marginalization of minority languages and cultures (Phillipson, 1992). This concept highlights the power dynamics at play in sociolinguistic interactions, where one language is privileged and imposed on others. One of the key aspects of linguistic imperialism is the role of English as a global lingua franca (Crystal, 2003). English has

become the dominant language of international communication, commerce, and education, leading to its widespread adoption as a second language in many countries. This dominance of English can have both positive and negative consequences, as it can facilitate global communication but also marginalize local languages and dialects. Furthermore, linguistic imperialism can be seen in the way language policies and practices are implemented in educational settings. Bourdieu (1991) argues that the imposition of a standard language in schools can perpetuate social inequalities, as students from minority language backgrounds may be at a disadvantage compared to those who speak the dominant language. This can lead to the erasure of linguistic diversity and the imposition of linguistic homogeneity. In Nigeria, this theory is central to understanding the challenges facing Language Policy and Planning (LPP), particularly in promoting indigenous languages amidst the overwhelming dominance of English. Nigeria's colonial history established English as the language of power, governance, and education. Post-independence, English retained its privileged status, reinforcing societal perceptions that equate English with

progress and indigenous languages with backwardness. This reflects the core of linguistic imperialism: the displacement and marginalization of local languages by a dominant foreign language. Despite progressive policies, such as the National Policy on Education(2004) recommending mother-tongue instruction at early levels, implementation remains weak. English continues to dominate due to its perceived economic and social value, leading to a lack of resources, prestige, and institutional support for indigenous languages. As a result, many Nigerian languages remain underdeveloped, especially in education and technology, creating inequalities and diminishing language vitality. However, linguistic imperialism also provides a framework for identifying opportunities. It highlights the need to decolonize language policies and promote additive bilingualism—learning English without abandoning indigenous languages. Efforts can focus on revitalizing local languages, creating educational resources, and raising public awareness about the cultural and national value of linguistic diversity.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design. A qualitative approach is appropriate for understanding language policies,

sociocultural attitudes, and educational practices, as it allows for in-depth exploration of lived experiences, opinions, and institutional perspectives. The population for the study are teachers, community members, curriculum officers and policy makers. The sample technique employed in this study is purposive which was used to select 5 language policy makers and 10 teachers from 5 public secondary schools in Awka South Local Government Area who are knowledgeable about language policy issues and have direct experience in education or language advocacy. The data was collected by an interview section

Results

The result of the analysis of this study is structured into different subheadings.

Challenges Hindering the Promotion and Use of Indigenous Languages

The study identifies six interrelated challenges:

1. Poor Policy Implementation: Indigenous languages are rarely used beyond early primary education, making their role in the education system largely ceremonial.

2. Lack of Educational Resources: The absence of textbooks, teaching aids, and digital content in indigenous languages limits their functional use.

3. Shortage of Qualified Teachers: There is a scarcity of educators who are both pedagogically trained and fluent in indigenous languages.

4. Negative Societal Attitudes: English is perceived as a gateway to socio-economic advancement, while indigenous languages are viewed as outdated.

5. Urbanization and Migration: Linguistic diversity in urban centers makes it challenging to prioritize any single indigenous language.

6. Government Inaction: The lack of political will to promote minority languages further entrenches their marginalization.

These challenges point to a deeply entrenched structural neglect of indigenous languages. Without curriculum development, institutional support, and teacher training, language promotion remains largely rhetorical. The societal preference for English—reinforced by globalization and neoliberal ideologies—contributes to the gradual erosion of linguistic diversity and cultural heritage. This reflects the findings of language endangerment theorists such as Fishman (1991), who emphasize the role of institutional support in language vitality. The analysis of the interview reveals that Nigeria's language policy, as articulated in the 1977 and revised 1981 National Policy

on Education (NPE). On paper, the policy supports multilingualism by promoting the use of indigenous languages in early education and recognizing the three major Nigerian languages—Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba—as national languages. However, in practice, the implementation of these policies is weak and inconsistent. This suggests a policy-practice dichotomy. While the language policy ostensibly embraces linguistic diversity, it fails to provide the institutional, financial, and human resource backing necessary for sustainable implementation. Language planning appears fragmented and ad hoc, with little federal-state coordination. These findings align with earlier scholarship that critiques African language policies for being symbolically inclusive but operationally ineffective (Bamgbose, 1991).

The Impact of English Language Dominance

English has emerged as a hegemonic force in Nigeria's linguistic landscape, exerting influence in education, employment, media, and social life. The dominance of English has several implications:

1. It marginalizes indigenous languages from formal and public domains.

2. It creates a prestige hierarchy that discourages the use and development of local languages.

3. It stifles linguistic innovation and the modernization of indigenous languages, limiting their capacity to adapt to contemporary realities.

This English language dominance, while facilitating international communication, has led to a diglossic situation where indigenous languages are confined to informal, private, or rural settings. Their exclusion from formal education, media, and policy discourse weakens their relevance and status. As Bourdieu (1991) argued, linguistic capital is unequally distributed, and English in Nigeria represents a form of symbolic power that dictates access to opportunities, status, and cultural legitimacy.

Opportunities for Revitalization and Promotion

Despite the challenges, the research identifies promising avenues for revitalizing indigenous languages:

1. Curriculum Reform: With political backing, indigenous languages could be integrated more robustly into formal education.

2. Technology and Media: Social media, language learning apps, and digital

dictionaries offer scalable tools for language promotion.

3. Community-Based Initiatives: Grassroots efforts—such as storytelling, cultural festivals, and local language schools—are revitalizing linguistic practices.

4. Academic Research and Documentation: Ongoing linguistic research is essential for developing standardized orthographies and preserving endangered languages.

5. Policy Decentralization: Local governments can create tailored policies that reflect the linguistic realities of their regions. These opportunities reflect a growing cultural awareness, particularly among younger generations who use social media and digital platforms to reclaim and celebrate indigenous identity. However, these initiatives require systematic investment and coordination to move from isolated efforts to national strategies. The integration of local languages into digital domains also opens possibilities for innovative language use and transmission, contributing to their modernization and preservation.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm a persistent tension between policy intention and implementation in Nigeria's language planning. While Nigeria's National Policy

on Education appears to support linguistic diversity, in reality, the system privileges English at the expense of indigenous languages. The widespread use of English in all high-status domains perpetuates a form of linguistic inequality, exacerbating the decline of indigenous languages. The lack of institutional support, compounded by sociocultural attitudes and globalization, has created an environment in which indigenous languages struggle to survive, let alone thrive.

Nonetheless, the study also reveals a growing cultural renaissance driven by local communities, academic institutions, and digital tools. For indigenous languages to be meaningfully revitalized, a multi-stakeholder approach involving governments, educators, parents, and media actors is necessary. Language policy must evolve from a symbolic declaration to a practical framework with clear, enforceable strategies and adequate funding.

Works Cited

- Adegbija, E. (2004). Language Policy and Planning in Nigeria. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 181–246.
- Ajayi, Taiwo. "Language-in-Education Policy and Planning in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects." *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 4, no. 14, 2013, pp. 147–156.

Akujobi, O. S. (2019). The English Language Hegemony and Sociolinguistic Effects on Indigenous Nigerian languages. *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development*. Vol. 2 No. 2. 130-143

Bamgbose, A.(2000)Language and Exclusion:The Consequences of Language Policies in Africa. Münster: LIT Verlag,.

Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. 1999.

Eberhard, David M., Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig(2022). editors. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. 25th ed., SIL International, www.ethnologue.com.

Emenanjo, E. Nolue. "Strategies for the Development of Minority Languages in Nigeria." *Nigerian Linguistic Journal*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2015, pp. 12–28.

Eneremadu, Q. E. C., & Ndubuaku, R. C. (n.d.). *Language Planning in Nigeria: Clash Between English and Indigenous Languages*. "ESA J" .

Eze, Chinyere. "Using Digital Platforms to Preserve Nigerian Languages." *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2020, pp. 205–220.

Eka, D. (2000). *Issues in Nigerian Language Policy and Planning*. Abaam Publishing Co.

Crystal, D. (2003). *Language Death*. Cambridge University Press.

Federal Republic of Nigeria. *National Policy on Education*. 4th ed., Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, 2004.

Fishman, Joshua A. *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages*. Multilingual Matters, 1991.

Igboanusi, H. (2004) "Empowering Nigerian Languages for National Development." *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies*, vol. 17, pp. 1–14.

Igboanusi, Herbert, and Lothar P.(2005) "Language Attitude and Language Conflict in Africa: The Case of Nigeria." *Linguistik Online*, vol. 18, no. 1, www.linguistik-online.com.

Idowu, A. O. (2016). *Language and National Unity in Nigeria: A Historical Overview*.

Journal of African Studies and Development, 8(6), 87-95.

National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN). *National Language Policy*. NINLAN, 2006.

Ndimele, O.M.(2018) *Language Endangerment and Language Revitalization in Africa*. M & J Grand Orbit Communications.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. (1986). *Decolonizing the mind: The politics of language in African*

literature. Nairobi, Kenya: East African Educational Publishers.

Nwachukwu, E. L., and Joseph, C. J. (2023). Bridging policy formulation and implementation: National Language Policy and documentation of mother tongue. *NILAS*, 7(1), 1–9.

Oyetade, S. (2010). "Language Planning and Policy in Nigeria." *Language Planning in Africa*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2010, pp. 1–16.

Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford University Press.

Suleiman, B. T. (2018). The Linguistic Diversity of Nigeria: The Challenge of Multilingualism in a Plural Society. *Studies in English Language and Literature*, 6(2), 56 -67.

UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages. *Language Vitality and Endangerment*. UNESCO, 2003.