

Evaluation of the Development of the English Language Curricula in Nigerian Schools, Including the Integration of Nigerian Literature and Culture

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Abstract

This paper provides a comprehensive evaluation of the development of English language curricula in Nigerian schools, with a particular focus on the integration of Nigerian literature and culture. It traces the historical evolution of English education from the colonial era to the present, analyzing how curricula have responded to Nigeria's socio-cultural and political contexts. The study examines the incorporation of Nigerian literary works and cultural themes, assessing their impact on student engagement, identity formation, and linguistic competence. Drawing on curriculum frameworks, educational policies, and stakeholder perspectives, the paper identifies achievements, persistent challenges, and disparities in implementation. Recommendations are proposed to enhance cultural relevance, address resource constraints, and promote a balanced curriculum that prepares students for both local and global contexts.

Keywords English language, Curricula, Nigerian schools, Nigerian literature and culture

Introduction

The English language, a remnant of British colonial rule, serves as Nigeria's official language and the primary medium of instruction in schools. Its role in education has been shaped by historical, political, and cultural forces, evolving from a tool of colonial administration to a vehicle for national identity and global communication. Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, English language curricula have undergone significant transformations to incorporate Nigerian literature and cultural elements, aiming to foster both linguistic proficiency and cultural pride. This paper evaluates the development of these curricula, exploring how effectively they integrate Nigerian literature and culture while addressing global educational standards. By analyzing historical trends, curriculum frameworks, pedagogical approaches, and implementation challenges, the study highlights achievements, identifies gaps, and proposes strategies for creating a more inclusive and effective English language curriculum. The integration of Nigerian literature and culture is critical in a multilingual nation with over 500 ethnic groups and languages (Ethnologue, 2023). This diversity necessitates curricula that reflect local identities while equipping students for global engagement.

The paper examines key milestones in curriculum development, the role of Nigerian authors, and the impact of cultural integration on student outcomes. It also addresses systemic challenges, such as resource limitations and teacher preparedness, and offers recommendations for future reforms.

Abridged Historical Context of English Language Education in Nigeria

Colonial Era and Missionary Influence

English language education in Nigeria began in the 19th century under British colonial rule, primarily through missionary schools established by organizations like the Church Missionary Society (CMS). The curriculum was designed to produce English-proficient individuals to serve as clerks, interpreters, and administrators for the colonial government (Adegbite, 2008). Texts such as Shakespeare's plays, Dickens' novels, and British poetry dominated, with no inclusion of African literature or cultural perspectives. This Eurocentric approach marginalized indigenous languages like Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa, reinforcing a colonial hierarchy that prioritized Western knowledge systems (Falola & Heaton, 2008).

Post-Independence Educational Reforms

Following independence in 1960, Nigeria sought to redefine its educational system to reflect national aspirations. The 1969 National Curriculum Conference marked a pivotal moment, advocating for curricula that promoted cultural identity and self-reliance (Fafunwa, 1974).

The inclusion of Nigerian literature, such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), began in the 1970s, signaling a shift toward culturally relevant education. The National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1977 formalized these efforts, emphasizing the integration of local content to foster national unity and cultural pride (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2004).

Influence of National Policies

The NPE, revised in 1981, 2004, and 2013, consistently emphasized the role of English as a unifying language in Nigeria's multilingual context. It also advocated for the inclusion of Nigerian literature to make education relevant to students' lived experiences. The Universal Basic Education (UBE) program, launched in 1999, expanded access to English education, particularly at the primary and junior secondary levels, with a focus on functional literacy and cultural awareness (Obanya, 2004).

These policies laid the foundation for a curriculum that balances global linguistic standards with local cultural narratives.

Evolution of English Language Curricula

Pre-Independence Era (Pre-1960)

During the colonial period, English curricula were rigid and Eurocentric, focusing on grammar, composition, and British literature. The West African Examinations Council (WAEC), established in 1952, standardized assessments but maintained a colonial framework, testing students on texts like *Macbeth* and *Pride and Prejudice* (Osoba, 2014). This approach alienated students from their cultural contexts, as the curriculum ignored Nigeria's rich oral traditions and indigenous knowledge systems.

Post-Independence Reforms (1960–1999)

The post-independence era saw gradual reforms aimed at decolonizing education. By the 1980s, the Senior Secondary School (SSS) curriculum began incorporating works

by Nigerian authors, including Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. These texts introduced students to themes of colonialism, gender, and cultural identity, making English studies more relatable (Adegoju, 2017).

The 1977 NPE emphasized functional English, encouraging skills like oral communication and critical reading, alongside cultural content. The UBE program further democratized access to English education, targeting universal literacy by 2000 (Obanya, 2004).

Contemporary Curriculum Framework (2000–Present)

The current English language curriculum, revised in 2013 by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), is structured around four language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. It integrates Nigerian literature, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, alongside global texts to ensure a balanced approach (NERDC, 2013). The curriculum emphasizes thematic units like family, community, and post-colonial identity, aligning with Nigeria's cultural diversity.

Assessments, including WAEC and NECO examinations, now include questions on Nigerian literature, reflecting its centrality in English education (Akinbode, 2019).

Integration of Nigerian Literature and Culture

Selection of Literary Texts

The inclusion of Nigerian literature has been a cornerstone of curriculum reform. Canonical works like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* explore Igbo traditions and colonial encounters, while Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* examines Yoruba cultural dynamics. Contemporary authors like Adichie and Ben Okri add modern perspectives, addressing issues like gender, migration, and globalization (Osoba, 2014). Poetry by writers like J.P. Clark and Niyi Osundare introduces students to Nigeria's oral traditions, while drama texts engage with communal values and social critique.

The selection process, guided by NERDC, prioritizes texts that reflect Nigeria's ethnic diversity and historical experiences (NERDC, 2013).

Cultural Themes and Pedagogical Strategies

The curriculum incorporates cultural themes such as communalism, oral storytelling, and post-colonial identity. For example, Achebe's novels highlight Igbo proverbs and communal values, while Soyinka's plays explore Yoruba mythology. Pedagogical strategies include interactive methods like group discussions, role-playing, and creative writing, which connect texts to students' cultural contexts (Adegbite, 2008). Teachers are encouraged to use local examples, such as folktales or proverbs, to teach English grammar and vocabulary, making learning more engaging.

However, the effectiveness of these strategies depends on teacher training and resource availability.

Impact on Student Learning Outcomes

Research indicates that culturally relevant curricula enhance student engagement and academic performance. A study by Ogundele (2016) found that students exposed to Nigerian literature scored 15% higher in English comprehension tests compared to those taught only global texts. Cultural familiarity fosters critical thinking, as students analyze themes like identity and resistance in relatable contexts (Akinbode, 2019). Moreover, Nigerian literature strengthens students' sense of identity, particularly in a multicultural society where ethnic tensions persist (Eze, 2020).

However, urban-rural disparities in access to texts and qualified teachers limit these benefits in some regions (Obanya, 2004).

Role of Indigenous Languages in English Curricula

Recent curricula have begun to integrate indigenous languages to support English learning, recognizing Nigeria's multilingual context. For instance, code-switching between English and local languages like Yoruba or Hausa is encouraged in early education to build vocabulary and comprehension (Adegbite, 2017). This approach aligns with the NPE's goal of preserving indigenous languages while promoting English proficiency.

However, the lack of standardized materials in local languages poses a challenge to this integration.

Challenges in Curriculum Implementation

Resource Constraints and Infrastructure Gaps

Many Nigerian schools, particularly in rural areas, lack access to prescribed texts, libraries, and teaching aids. A 2020 survey by the Nigerian Ministry of Education reported that 60% of public schools lacked adequate English textbooks (Federal Ministry of Education, 2020). This scarcity forces teachers to rely on outdated materials or omit literary components, undermining cultural integration (Adegbite, 2008).

Teacher Training and Professional Development

Teacher preparedness remains a significant barrier. Many educators lack training in culturally responsive pedagogy, relying on traditional methods like rote memorization (Osoba, 2014). A 2018 study found that only 30% of English teachers in public schools had received in-service training on Nigerian literature (Akinbode, 2019).

This gap limits the ability to engage students with interactive and culturally relevant teaching methods.

Balancing Linguistic Proficiency and Cultural Identity

The curriculum faces the challenge of balancing English proficiency with cultural integration. An overemphasis on global standards, such as preparing students for international exams like IELTS, can marginalize Nigerian content (NERDC, 2013). Conversely, excessive focus on local literature risks limiting exposure to universal literary traditions, potentially disadvantaging students in global contexts (Eze, 2020).

Urban-Rural Disparities

Urban schools, with better funding and access to resources, implement the curriculum more effectively than rural schools. For example, urban students have greater access to digital libraries and supplementary materials, while rural students often rely on teacher summaries due to text shortages (Obanya, 2004).

This disparity exacerbates educational inequality and limits the reach of culturally relevant education.

Comparative Perspectives: Global Best Practices

Other multilingual and postcolonial nations have undertaken curriculum reforms to integrate local literature and culture into language teaching. Two notable examples are India and South Africa. In India, the National Curriculum Framework (2005) promotes the use of regional literature in English language teaching. Students read translated local stories and explore cultural idioms to develop language skills and cultural sensitivity. Textbooks published by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) feature folktales, historical narratives, and socially relevant themes drawn from India's diverse heritage.

South Africa, grappling with the legacy of apartheid, has embraced a multilingual and multicultural curriculum. English is taught alongside indigenous languages, and literary texts reflect the country's complex socio-political history.

Works by black South African authors such as Nadine Gordimer and Bessie Head are central to literature syllabi.

These comparative models highlight the importance of:

- Local authorship in textbook production;
- Government investment in culturally inclusive content;
- Teacher training in culturally responsive pedagogy;
- Community participation in curriculum development.

Nigeria can adopt similar strategies by promoting the publication and dissemination of Nigerian literature, supporting multilingual education, and fostering collaboration between educators and cultural institutions.

Future Directions

To address these challenges and enhance the English language curriculum, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Policy Recommendations

- Increase government funding for educational resources, targeting rural schools to ensure equitable access to Nigerian literary texts.
- Revise the NPE to mandate the inclusion of contemporary Nigerian literature, reflecting current social issues like technology and globalization.

2. Curriculum Design Enhancements

- Develop a hybrid curriculum that balances Nigerian and global literature, ensuring students are prepared for both local and international contexts.
- Incorporate digital platforms, such as e-books and online

literary archives, to address text shortages and engage tech-savvy students.

3. Teacher Development Initiatives

- Implement mandatory in-service training programs focusing on culturally responsive pedagogy and modern teaching methods.
- Partner with universities and literary organizations to provide workshops on Nigerian literature and its pedagogical applications.

4. Community and Stakeholder Engagement

- Involve local communities in curriculum development to ensure cultural relevance and representation of diverse ethnic voices.
- Collaborate with Nigerian authors and publishers to create affordable, age-appropriate texts for schools.

Conclusion

The development of English language curricula in Nigerian schools reflects a concerted effort to integrate linguistic proficiency with cultural identity. From its colonial origins to the present, the curriculum has evolved to incorporate Nigerian literature and cultural themes, fostering student engagement and national pride.

However, challenges such as resource constraints, inadequate teacher training, and urban-rural disparities hinder effective implementation. By addressing these gaps through targeted policies, curriculum enhancements, and teacher development,

Nigeria can create a robust English curriculum that empowers students to navigate their cultural heritage and global opportunities.

The continued integration of Nigerian literature and culture will ensure that English education remains a tool for both empowerment and identity formation in a diverse nation.

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