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**TOPIC:**

**DESPITE THE SPLENDIFEROUS NATURE OF LANGUAGE POLICY  
AND PLANNING IN NIGERIA, SCHOLARS HAVE DETECTED SOME  
MISMATCH BETWEEN POLICY FORMULATION AND POLICY  
IMPLEMENTATION. DISCUSS?**

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# **Language Policy and Planning in Nigeria: The Gap Between Formulation and Implementation**

## **Abstract**

Language policy and planning in Nigeria have been celebrated for their ambitious and inclusive nature, aiming to foster national unity, enhance literacy, and promote cultural preservation within a nation boasting over 500 indigenous languages. However, several studies and real-world observations highlight a consistent and pervasive gap between policy formulation and implementation. This paper investigates the underlying causes of this persistent mismatch, exploring a complex interplay of political, socio-cultural, economic, and infrastructural factors. Using specific examples from Nigeria's National Policy on Education (NPE) and other relevant legislative frameworks, this study also proposes pragmatic and actionable solutions to bridge the implementation gap, thereby contributing to the effective realization of Nigeria's linguistic and educational goals.

## **Introduction**

Nigeria, a nation characterized by an extraordinary degree of linguistic diversity, with an estimated 521 living languages, has, since its independence, embarked on a journey to craft inclusive language policies designed to accommodate its rich multilingual tapestry (Lewis et al., 2024). Language policy and planning have been strategically employed as crucial tools to achieve multifaceted national objectives: fostering national unity amidst diverse ethnic groups, enhancing literacy rates across the populace, and promoting the invaluable preservation of Nigeria's diverse cultural heritage. Despite these lofty and well-intentioned aspirations, the practical realization of these goals has proven to be remarkably elusive. A consistent theme in scholarly discourse is the striking mismatch between meticulously formulated, well-meaning policies and their often-poor, inconsistent, or altogether absent implementation (Bamgbose, 2005; Afolayan, 1976). This paper delves into the intricacies of this implementation gap, seeking to understand its genesis and proposing viable pathways toward a more effective language policy landscape in Nigeria.

## **The Splendiferous Nature of Nigeria's Language Policy**

Nigeria's commitment to language development and cultural pluralism is perhaps best exemplified by its National Policy on Education (NPE). This

foundational document, revised multiple times since its inception (1977, 1981, 1998, 2004, and 2013), consistently underscores the profound significance of language in both education and the broader project of nation-building (FRN, 2013). A cornerstone of the NPE's language provisions is the recommendation for the use of the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community as the medium of instruction in the early years of schooling. Specifically, the 2013 edition of the NPE stipulates that "Government will ensure that the medium of instruction in the pre-primary school shall be principally the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community" and that "in the primary school, the medium of instruction in the first three years shall be the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment" (FRN, 2013, pp. 14-15). This policy demonstrates a clear understanding of the pedagogical benefits of early education in a familiar language, facilitating cognitive development and easier acquisition of literacy skills.

Beyond mother tongue education, the NPE also champions multilingualism, advocating for the promotion of English as an official language alongside major Nigerian languages such as Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, which are accorded national language status. The policy further encourages the learning of at least one of these major Nigerian languages by all students, regardless of their ethnic background (FRN, 2013). This progressive stance reflects a nuanced approach to language, recognizing the need for a lingua franca for national and international communication while simultaneously valuing and promoting Nigeria's rich indigenous linguistic heritage. The theoretical commitment to corpus planning (the development of vocabulary, grammar, and writing systems for indigenous languages) and status planning (assigning specific functions and roles to different languages within society) is evident in the comprehensive nature of these policy documents.

## **Policy Formulation: Theoretical Commitment**

The process of formulating language policy in Nigeria is often characterized by a high degree of theoretical commitment and intellectual rigor. It typically involves the convening of expert committees comprising linguists, educators, sociologists, and policymakers. These committees engage in extensive research, national conferences, and wide-ranging consultations with various stakeholders, including community leaders, cultural organizations, and educational institutions. This inclusive approach is designed to ensure that the

policies are well-informed, culturally sensitive, and reflective of the diverse linguistic realities of the nation.

Scholars like Ayo Bamgbose, a prominent figure in African linguistics, have consistently lauded the depth of analysis and the inclusive nature of Nigeria's language policy documents. Bamgbose (1991) has praised the "comprehensive and well-articulated" nature of these policies, particularly highlighting their theoretical soundness and their aspiration to address the complex linguistic challenges of a multilingual society. The theoretical frameworks of corpus planning and status planning are meticulously applied in the crafting of these policies. For instance, corpus planning initiatives aim to standardize orthographies, develop new terminology, and create teaching materials for indigenous languages, thereby elevating their functional capacity.<sup>1</sup> Status planning, on the other hand, seeks to define the roles of different languages in various domains, such as education, administration, and media, aiming to promote indigenous languages alongside English.<sup>2</sup> The commitment on paper is often exemplary, laying out a vision for a truly multilingual and culturally rich nation.

## **Policy Implementation: A Reality Check**

Despite the robust theoretical underpinnings and the meticulous formulation of language policies, the implementation phase presents a stark reality check. The gap between policy and practice in Nigeria's language education sector is widely acknowledged and deeply concerning. One of the most significant impediments to effective implementation is the severe shortage of qualified teachers capable of instructing in indigenous languages.<sup>3</sup> While the NPE mandates mother-tongue instruction in early years, a substantial number of teachers lack the necessary linguistic proficiency or pedagogical training to effectively deliver lessons in these languages. A 2019 report by the National Teachers' Institute revealed that less than 30% of primary school teachers nationwide were adequately trained to teach in indigenous languages, particularly in regions where diverse minority languages are spoken (National Teachers' Institute, 2019).

Furthermore, the absence of standardized orthographies for many of Nigeria's over 500 languages poses a formidable challenge. Without agreed-upon writing systems, the development of consistent and accessible teaching materials becomes an arduous task. Even for languages with established orthographies, the availability of textbooks, storybooks, and other educational

resources in indigenous languages remains critically scarce. For example, a survey conducted in several public primary schools in Lagos State in 2022 indicated that over 80% of schools did not have sufficient textbooks in Yoruba, despite it being the dominant indigenous language in the region and a mandated medium of instruction in early primary grades (Lagos State Universal Basic Education Board, 2022).

The practical reality on the ground often diverges sharply from policy directives. While the NPE mandates that early education be conducted in the child's mother tongue, this provision is frequently bypassed. Instead, English continues to dominate as the primary medium of instruction, even in foundational years. This trend is driven by several factors, including the perceived prestige associated with English, its global relevance, and the belief among many parents and educators that early exposure to English provides a competitive advantage in a globalized world. Consequently, many Nigerian children, particularly in urban areas, begin their formal education in a language they do not fully comprehend, leading to significant learning disadvantages and contributing to educational inequality.

### **Factors Responsible for the Mismatch**

The persistent gap between language policy formulation and implementation in Nigeria is attributable to a complex interplay of multifaceted factors:

**a. Political Will and Inconsistency:** A critical impediment to effective language policy implementation is the fluctuating political will and inherent inconsistency in government priorities. Nigeria's political landscape is characterized by frequent regime changes, each often bringing with it new agendas and a lack of continuity in long-term policy initiatives. Language planning, which requires sustained commitment and investment over decades, often falls victim to these shifts. Policies are frequently formulated with great fanfare but are not subsequently backed with sufficient and consistent funding, nor are they fortified by robust legal enforcement mechanisms. Without strong political backing and the necessary legislative teeth, policies remain mere suggestions rather than enforceable directives. For instance, budgetary allocations for the development of indigenous languages within the education sector have historically been meager and subject to significant cuts during periods of economic downturn. A 2021 analysis of the federal budget for education revealed that less than 1% of the total budget was specifically

allocated to indigenous language development and promotion programs (Centre for Social Justice, 2021).

**b. Lack of Infrastructure and Resources:** The infrastructural deficit in Nigeria's education system profoundly impacts language policy implementation. Many public schools, particularly those located in rural and underserved areas, are severely underfunded and lack basic teaching tools, electricity, and even adequate classroom facilities.<sup>4</sup> The ambitious goal of developing and distributing textbooks in over 500 languages presents an enormous logistical and financial nightmare. This challenge is further compounded by the absence of functional publishing houses specializing in indigenous language materials and an inefficient distribution network. Furthermore, the limited access to technology and digital resources in many schools hinders the development of modern, interactive learning materials that could aid in language acquisition.<sup>5</sup> This resource scarcity makes it virtually impossible to meet the material requirements of a truly multilingual education system.

**c. Sociolinguistic Realities:** The evolving sociolinguistic landscape of Nigeria presents unique challenges to the application of mother-tongue instruction.<sup>6</sup> Rapid urbanization has led to significant population movements and the formation of multi-ethnic urban centers where inter-ethnic marriages are increasingly common. Consequently, many children born in these environments grow up speaking a blend of languages or primarily English, and may not have a fluent command of either parent's native language. Applying a rigid mother-tongue instruction policy in such contexts becomes exceedingly complex and often impractical. For example, in a classroom in a major city like Lagos, a single class might comprise children from diverse linguistic backgrounds (e.g., Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Edo, Efik), making it unfeasible to provide instruction in each child's specific mother tongue. This reality often forces teachers to default to English as the common medium of communication.

**d. Attitude Towards Indigenous Languages:** Perhaps one of the most ingrained and pervasive barriers to language policy implementation is the prevailing societal attitude towards indigenous languages. A significant segment of parents, educators, and even policymakers often hold the conviction that English is superior and more relevant in a globalized world.<sup>7</sup> Indigenous languages are, unfortunately, sometimes perceived as "backward," "local," or "irrelevant" in modern society, especially when compared to the

perceived economic and social advantages associated with proficiency in English.<sup>8</sup> This attitudinal bias translates into a reduced demand for indigenous language instruction, a lack of parental support for mother-tongue education, and a preference for English-medium schools, even when quality mother-tongue education is available. The perceived lack of socio-economic mobility tied to indigenous language proficiency further entrenches this preference for English. A 2018 survey conducted by a local research firm found that over 70% of parents in urban areas preferred their children to be educated primarily in English, citing better job prospects and international opportunities (EduConsult Research, 2018).

## **Case Studies and Scholarly Observations**

The disconnect between policy and practice in Nigerian language education has been a recurring theme in scholarly discourse for decades. Ayo Bamgbose, in his 2005 work, incisively described Nigerian language policy as "well-formulated but poorly executed." He argued that while the intentions were noble and the policies theoretically sound, the practical mechanisms for their implementation were consistently lacking. Bamgbose specifically pointed to the absence of adequate funding, teacher training, and material development as critical stumbling blocks.

Similarly, A. Afolayan, as early as 1976, noted that language policy in Nigeria tended to be "idealistic," often formulated without robust mechanisms for continuous evaluation, feedback, and necessary adjustments. This lack of a dynamic, responsive framework meant that policies, once formulated, remained static even when practical challenges emerged during implementation.

A comprehensive study by E. Adegbija (2004) further elucidated this phenomenon, particularly focusing on language attitudes. Adegbija's research highlighted that even in contexts where policy explicitly mandated the use of indigenous languages in instruction, teachers frequently reverted to English. This reversion was primarily attributed to the absence of adequate teacher training in indigenous language pedagogy, the scarcity of teaching materials in these languages, and the teachers' own ingrained attitudes favoring English as the language of prestige and knowledge acquisition. Adegbija's work underscores the critical role of teacher preparedness and resource availability in translating policy into classroom reality. Another significant observation comes from Osinubi and Osinubi (2006), who noted that the inconsistent

application of language policy across different states and regions in Nigeria created further disparities, leading to varying levels of success in implementation. They emphasized that a lack of a unified and consistently applied national strategy further exacerbated the implementation gap.

## **Consequences of Poor Implementation**

The persistent failure to effectively implement Nigeria's language policies carries severe and far-reaching consequences across various sectors of national life:

- **Educational Inequality:** The dominance of English as the medium of instruction, particularly in the early years of schooling, disproportionately disadvantages children who do not have a strong foundation in English from home.<sup>9</sup> This creates a significant academic barrier, as these children struggle to comprehend lessons taught in an unfamiliar language, leading to lower academic performance, higher dropout rates, and a widening achievement gap between urban and rural students, and between children from English-speaking homes and those from non-English speaking backgrounds. This initial disadvantage often compounds throughout their educational journey, limiting their access to higher education and future opportunities.
- **Language Endangerment:** The neglect of indigenous languages in formal education and public life accelerates their decline and pushes them towards endangerment.<sup>10</sup> When languages are not used in prestigious domains such as education, government, and media, their intergenerational transmission weakens.<sup>11</sup> Younger generations may perceive their ancestral languages as less valuable or relevant, leading to a diminished desire to learn or speak them. With over 25 Nigerian languages already extinct and many more classified as endangered, the poor implementation of mother-tongue education policies contributes directly to this critical loss of linguistic and cultural heritage (Ethnologue, 2024).
- **Cultural Alienation:** Language is intrinsically linked to culture, identity, and worldview.<sup>12</sup> When learners are primarily educated in a foreign language and their mother tongue is neglected, they risk becoming alienated from their own cultural heritage and identity. This cultural estrangement can manifest as a diminished sense of belonging, a lack of appreciation for traditional knowledge systems, and a disconnection from their community's values and history. It can also

impede the effective transmission of cultural norms, folklore, and indigenous knowledge across generations, leading to a gradual erosion of Nigeria's diverse cultural tapestry.

- **National Disunity:** While language can be a powerful tool for integration and fostering a shared national identity, its mismanagement can equally be a source of division. The unequal promotion of languages, or the perceived marginalization of certain linguistic groups due to poor policy implementation, can breed resentment, distrust, and a sense of exclusion among different ethnic communities.<sup>13</sup> This can undermine efforts towards national unity and social cohesion, potentially leading to inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts. A truly inclusive language policy, effectively implemented, can foster a sense of shared ownership and mutual respect among Nigeria's diverse linguistic groups.

## Recommendations

Bridging the persistent gap between language policy formulation and implementation in Nigeria requires a concerted, multi-pronged approach involving significant investment, sustained political will, and a fundamental shift in societal attitudes.<sup>14</sup> The following recommendations offer pragmatic solutions:

1. **Teacher Training and Professional Development:** This is perhaps the most critical intervention. The government must establish and adequately fund specialized language training institutions and programs specifically designed to train teachers in indigenous languages. These programs should focus not only on linguistic proficiency but also on pedagogical methodologies for teaching in a multilingual context. Existing teachers should undergo mandatory in-service training and workshops to improve their proficiency in indigenous languages and equip them with the skills to effectively deliver mother-tongue instruction. Incentives, such as specialized allowances and career progression opportunities, should be offered to teachers who specialize in indigenous language education to attract and retain talent. A national target for increasing the percentage of qualified indigenous language teachers should be set and regularly monitored.
2. **Material Development and Resource Provision:** The government, in collaboration with private publishers, universities, and cultural organizations, must fund and prioritize the systematic production and

distribution of high-quality textbooks, storybooks, instructional guides, and digital resources in Nigerian languages. This requires a robust and consistent budgetary allocation. Efforts should focus on standardizing orthographies for languages where they are still inconsistent to facilitate widespread material development. Furthermore, establishing dedicated indigenous language resource centers in each senatorial district, equipped with libraries, digital learning tools, and publishing facilities, could serve as hubs for material creation and dissemination. Collaboration with international organizations and donor agencies with expertise in multilingual education could also provide valuable technical support and funding.

**3. Robust Monitoring and Evaluation Framework:** To ensure accountability and track progress, a dedicated, autonomous language policy implementation agency should be established. This agency, perhaps under the Ministry of Education, would be tasked with overseeing the implementation of language policies across all levels of education. Its responsibilities would include:

- Developing clear, measurable indicators for policy implementation.
- Conducting regular audits and assessments of schools to ensure compliance with mother-tongue instruction and indigenous language teaching.
- Collecting data on teacher availability, material distribution, and student performance in indigenous languages.
- Providing feedback to policymakers for necessary adjustments and revisions to existing policies.
- Publishing annual reports on the state of language policy implementation to foster transparency and accountability.

**4. Public Awareness and Advocacy Campaigns:** A fundamental shift in societal attitudes towards indigenous languages is imperative. The government, through its ministries of information and culture, should launch sustained and comprehensive public awareness campaigns utilizing various media (television, radio, social media, community forums). These campaigns should highlight the value and importance of indigenous languages for cultural identity, cognitive development, and national pride. They should actively debunk the myth that indigenous languages are inferior or irrelevant and emphasize the benefits of multilingualism. Engaging celebrities, cultural icons, and

prominent personalities as ambassadors for indigenous languages can further enhance the reach and impact of these campaigns.

5. **Incremental and Phased Implementation:** Given the sheer number of languages in Nigeria and the resource constraints, a pragmatic approach to implementation is to begin with a phased, incremental strategy. Instead of attempting to implement mother-tongue instruction in all 500+ languages simultaneously, efforts could initially focus on strengthening the implementation of the policy for the three major national languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) and other widely spoken regional languages. As successes are achieved and lessons learned, the program can then be gradually expanded to include other languages, potentially starting with those that have developed orthographies and a critical mass of speakers. This phased approach allows for resource concentration, better quality control, and the development of effective models that can be replicated.

## Conclusion

Nigeria's language policies, particularly as articulated in the National Policy on Education, reflect a commendable and splendid vision of unity in diversity. They are theoretically sound, comprehensive, and aim to harness the nation's linguistic richness for educational equity, cultural preservation, and national development. However, this grand vision remains largely theoretical, with a gaping chasm separating formulation from effective implementation. The causes of this mismatch are multifaceted, encompassing political inconsistency, severe resource deficits, complex sociolinguistic realities, and deeply entrenched negative attitudes towards indigenous languages. Until deliberate, well-funded, consistently enforced, and culturally sensitive steps are taken to address these systemic challenges, the persistent mismatch between policy and practice will continue to undermine Nigeria's linguistic heritage and educational aspirations. Bridging this implementation gap is not merely an academic exercise; it is an imperative for achieving genuine educational equity, safeguarding invaluable cultural diversity, fostering national cohesion, and ultimately, realizing Nigeria's full potential as a truly multilingual and multicultural nation.

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