

Bridging the gap between theory and implementation: National language policy and documentation of mother tongue

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Abstract - Language is an essential aspect of identity and culture, playing a significant role in shaping a nation's socio-political landscape. This is why nations are continuously making effort to preserve their indigenous languages. This paper investigates the grey area of theory and implementation of the national language policy in the preservation, revitalization, documentation of mother tongue. It discusses the challenges such as lack of adequate instructional materials and qualified teachers in indigenous language, facing indigenous languages in Nigeria and how the implementation of language national language policy can promote mother tongue revitalization beyond the classroom. The paper adopts Language ecology model and David Crystal's theory of language revitalization to investigate the study. The paper adopts descriptive analysis methodology, which will use current and historical data to identify gaps in the study. The paper concludes that bridging the gap between theory and implementation of national language policy in Nigeria is a complex but a necessary and essential national task that involves the government allocating resources to produce adequate instructional materials and training teachers to be qualified in teaching indigenous languages. Also government and stakeholders should intensify efforts outside the classroom, preserving mother tongue and revitalizing endangered languages requires a multifaceted approach that extends well beyond the classroom, which involves fostering a cultural environment where the language is valued and used in daily life, creating intergenerational connections, leveraging technology and documenting linguistic resources.

Keywords: Language, Language documentation, Mother tongue, National Language Policy

I. INTRODUCTION

The natural human languages are the lifeblood of culture, identity, and heritage. They serve as vehicles for transmitting knowledge, values, and traditions across generations. However, linguistic diversity is under threat worldwide, with many languages endangered and facing extinction, such is the case with many languages in Nigeria. Indigenous language which is also known as mother tongue hold immense cultural and historical significance, yet they are disappearing at an alarming rate. Nigeria has a dire case of *linguicide* on its hands and timely intervention beyond mere words is needed. The Nigerian National language policy plays a pivotal role in addressing this crisis by recognizing the importance of protecting, preserving and documenting indigenous languages.

As a linguistically diverse country, Nigeria is experiencing the phenomenon of language endangerment and the rate of language endangerment and extinction in Nigeria is underreported and the numbers underrepresented. According to the United Nations, indigenous languages are under threat of disappearing, with one language dying every two weeks and many more at risk. (United Nations, 2016) If the linguistic diversity of Nigeria is to continue evolving to preserve identities, heritage, and culture of the people, and preventing them from going into extinction, there is need for significant and evident mere policy intervention on paper.

Are (2015) notes that language is central and fundamental to communication, culture, and the very essence of people's collective identities. The permanent loss of any language is therefore a serious matter. The various languages in Nigeria emerged, evolved and survived to serve the primary role conveying the thoughts, ideas, concepts and world view of the people in unique ways. The national language policy was designed because the importance of preserving and documenting endangered mother tongues cannot be overstated. These indigenous languages hold a treasure trove of cultural knowledge, traditions, and identity. However, the effective implementation of the policy has remained challenging. This study identifies the lack of adequate instructional materials, qualified teachers in indigenous languages, and over-concentration of implementation in the school. If the goals of the national language policy are to be achieved, efforts must be strategic. The challenges mentioned above must be addressed in a systematic and timely manner. This is crucial for the preservation of cultural heritage and linguistic diversity, and the promotion of intercultural communication.

1.1 Mother tongue

McArthur (2023) defines mother tongue as a general term for the language of the childhood home, learned 'at one's mother's knee', often used synonymously with Native Language. The term is often used to mean a national language, whether or not it is the first or preferred language of all members of the nation. Dogara (2022) defined mother tongue as a person's native language, that is, a language learned from birth. It is also called a first language, dominant language, home language, and native tongue (although these terms are not necessarily synonymous). She further defined mother tongue as a general term for the language of the childhood home, learned 'at one's mother's knee', often used synonymously with Native Language.

Savage (2019) refers to mother tongue as one's first language or native language. It is the language that one most commonly speaks. However, mother tongue is always referencing the language that the child has used from birth and in important and impacting times in the child's life.

1.2 Language Documentation

Austin (2021) sees language documentation as processes and efforts channeled to make language resources available for use in language revitalization and preservation. Grenoble & Furbee (2010); Are (2015) defines language documentation as documentary linguistics which has emerged as a response to the pressing need for collecting, describing, and archiving material on the increasing number of endangered languages.

1.3 Language Ecology Model

The theoretical framework adopted for this paper is the language ecology model. Language ecology was proposed by Einar Haugen in 1972 as the study of the interaction of any given language and its environment (Haugen, 1972). This linguistic model studies human languages in relation to one another and to various social factors that influence it. This model views language as a living organism that is constantly evolving and interacting with its environment. Linguistic ecology typically makes the case for the preservation of endangered languages using the comparison of the preservation of biological species. It sees language as an integral part of its surroundings and a social practice that exists within social existence and therefore studies how languages interact with one another and the environments in which they are spoken.

The language ecology model suggests that the survival of a language depends on a number of factors, including the number of speakers, the availability of educational instructional materials, and the attitudes of the speakers and the wider community. The study argues that the implementation of the national language policy depends of these factors, and positive attitude of the speakers, that is taking pride in their language and using it in everyday communication, instead of speaking the national lingua franca, English language at the detriment of their mother tongues.

1.4 David Crystal's Theory of Language Revitalization

This theory was propounded by British linguist, David Crystal. He wrote extensively on the disappearance of languages. According to David Crystal, the process of language decline happens in three stages. First, the minority becomes exposed to immense pressure, whether political, social or economic, to speak the dominant language. It may be either "top down", that is in the form of incentives, recommendations or laws introduced by a government or national bodies (Crystal, 2000) or "bottom up" in the form of peer group pressure or fashionable trends. The result of this pressure (stage two) is a period of emerging bilingualism, in which the minority people become increasingly proficient in the dominant language. During the third and last stage, this bilingualism starts to decline as the younger generation increasingly identifies with the new language and may often be ashamed to use the old language outside their homes. This is the case in Nigeria, where many people do not take pride in speaking their indigenous language, in favour of English language.

Crystal insists that chances for success are best if efforts to maintain an endangered language are focused on Stage 2, as it would be impossible nowadays to influence the factors which underlie the first stage in this process. Trying to influence the third stage would be too late for most languages. However, in the bilingualism of Stage 2 he sees an option for peaceful co-existence and a state in which both languages are seen as complementary. Crystal establishes several top priorities for saving endangered languages. He believes that public relations' activities in favour of language diversity are necessary as is developing in people a sense of the value of a language. Also, the gathering of information on endangered languages is important when pinpointing the most urgent cases. Data on the number of speakers, their age and fluency as well as the attitudes of the minority and the majority groups are crucial for assessing

linguistic vitality and the possibility of revitalization. As mentioned earlier in the introduction, the numbers of dying languages are underreported. Without accurate data, it will be difficult to know how to address the problem. Crystal mentions physical well-being, without which people have other more pressing concerns than language maintenance. This is true of Nigeria with deteriorating economic environment leaving millions in poverty; it appears language preservation is not of pressing concern. Language experts and policy documents should foster positive community attitudes, as positive self-esteem of the speech community is crucial for any language revitalization efforts. Language preservation and revitalization requires that the people use the language in their daily lives. This means creating spaces where people can speak the language with each other and where the language is used in a variety of contexts, such as the education, media, government, and entertainment. For this to happen, it requires that the language be valued and respected by the language community. This means promoting the language and its culture and challenging negative attitudes towards the language.

II. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

2.1 Empirical reviews

Nigeria National language policy comprises set of laws and regulations that govern the use of indigenous languages in Nigeria. The National language policy play a significant role in promoting mother tongue revitalization by providing support for the use of indigenous languages in education, government, and other public domains, making it mandatory to use the mother tongue a compulsory medium of instruction from Primary 1 to 6. There is a growing body of literature on the intersection of national language policy and language preservation and documentation in promoting mother tongue.

UNESCO (2022) underscore the importance of mother tongue in education and has been leading the way and advocating for multilingual education based on the mother tongue from the earliest years of schooling. Education in the mother tongue is a key factor for inclusion and quality learning, and it also improves learning outcomes and academic performance. This is crucial, especially in primary school to avoid knowledge gaps and increase the speed of learning and comprehension. Education delivered in the mother tongue empowers all learners to fully take part in society in preserving the wealth of cultural and traditional heritage that is embedded in every language around the world.

According to Qismullah et al (2022) it is undeniably true that local languages will be preserved if they are respected, used, and inherited to the next generations. To underlie the importance of indigenous language or mother tongue, Bott (2021) noted that no matter how many languages a person speaks, their mother tongue is always the most important. Mother languages hold the soundtracks to childhood; allow ancestral wisdom and knowledge to pass from generation to generation, and help speakers feel more connected to their elders and families.

Linguists and anthropologists, among others, have come to recognize the importance of linguistic diversity and the threat posed by the current accelerated rate of language loss. (Zeitlyn et al., 2021). This necessitated the National language policy (2022), making it mandatory to use the mother tongue a compulsory medium of instruction from Primary 1 to 6.

Similarly, Savage (2019) stated that having a strong mother tongue foundation leads to a much better understanding of the curriculum as well as a more positive attitude towards school, so it's vital that children maintain their first language when they

begin schooling. This study agrees with Savage that the use of mother tongue in education fosters the development of the critical domains of the learners which includes other essential skills, such as critical thinking and literacy skills. However, this study discovers a gap in the submissions of UNESCO (2022) and Savage (2019; Blench, 2013), there is over concentration on the use of mother tongue in education without looking at the possibilities that lie outside the classroom, which is also present in the national language policy. Beyond the classrooms, efforts should be steered in the direction of community engagement, and awareness on the need to use, preserve and revitalize mother tongue.

Emphasizing the importance of mother tongue in education, the study by Nord (2022) reveals that children who come to school with a solid foundation in their mother tongue don't only benefit personally by connecting with their culture and other members of their communities, but they also benefit intellectually and develop stronger literacy skills including learning an additional language.

2.2 The Rhetoric of Theory and Implementation of National Language Policy

Nigeria National language policy is the federal government's initiative to protect and revitalize indigenous language and language-related decisions. Bridging the gap between theory and implementation is a perennial challenge bedeviling many finely designed policies in Nigeria such as the national language policy. Beyond the abstract concepts, plans, or policies, how can the national language policy translate into practical actions and tangible outcomes? The success of the policy depends on its strategic and effective execution in the real world. Theoretically-laden policies are typically broad, idealistic, and abstract, while its implementation demands specific, concrete, and pragmatic actions. This disconnect can result in a lack of clarity, misalignment of goals, and numerous challenges that hinder expected outcomes.

The policy serves multiple functions, but significantly impact the preservation of indigenous languages and revitalization and documentation of endangered mother tongues. The national language policy is unequivocal in the different ways of language documentation and revitalization, however, the most important challenge remains the grey area of effective implementation. Implementation of the national language policy is often a complex and challenging process, this is because the coordination and enforcement of language policies can be difficult to arrive at. Implementing the national language policy is critical to the preservation of indigenous languages, ensuring the continuation and transmission of culture, customs and history.

The importance of documenting endangered mother tongues through national language policy cannot be overstated. These languages hold a treasure trove of cultural knowledge, traditions, and identity. National language policies play a pivotal role in recognizing, validating, and supporting the documentation of these languages. This documentation not only preserves cultural heritage but also aids in linguistic research, education, and revitalization efforts.

While English language inherited from the colonial era, serves as the official language and the medium of instruction in education and administration. Nigeria is a linguistically diverse nation with over 500 ethnic groups, each having its unique language or dialect. The three major ethnic groups, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, are particularly significant in terms of population and cultural influence; however, there are other languages like Ibibio, Kanuri, Fula, Tiv, Nupe, Epira, Bini, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Isan, Efik, Langtang, Gbagyi, Isoko, Igala, Jukun, Waja, Waka, Ijaw, Annang, Jarawa, Gade, Kambari, Banka, etc. This linguistic diversity is both a source of strength and a challenge for the country. The study will discuss the challenges of lack of adequate instructional

materials, lack of qualified teachers in indigenous language, and overconcentration of the implementation efforts in school.

2.3 Lack of or insufficient Instructional Materials

Indigenous languages are a critical part of the Nigeria's linguistic and cultural diversity, representing unique systems of communication, knowledge, and identity. However, many of these languages are endangered and face the risk of extinction, as they are not adequately passed down to younger generations. One significant factor contributing to language endangerment is the lack of instructional materials, which are essential for language preservation and documentation efforts. There are inadequate instructional materials in the three major languages and other local languages are even neglected because there no linguists or language experts in writing and documenting indigenous languages.

Instructional materials are fundamental tools for teaching, learning, and documenting languages. Their absence or inadequacy has profound consequences for endangered languages in Nigeria. The former minister of education, Adamu Adamu, admitted that implementation of the national language policy will be difficult, because the instructional materials have yet to be developed and the teachers trained.

Without appropriate instructional materials in different national language, it will be challenging to implement the national language policy and teach in indigenous languages effectively. This hampers language revitalization efforts, as the younger generation lacks access to quality education in their mother tongue. This also implies that insufficient materials limit language learning in classrooms and beyond. Without which, language teaching and learning becomes less effective, making it difficult to engage and retain learners. This also hinders intergenerational transmission of the language. When teachers and parents lack resources to support language acquisition, the younger generations are less likely to become fluent speakers or users of the language. When there are no resources to support the continued use of the language, speakers may abandon it in favour of more widely spoken languages or English language which is the lingua franca.

Inadequate instructional materials in indigenous languages also limit the ability to document the language comprehensively. The younger generation, educational institutions, Linguists and language activists rely on materials like grammars, dictionaries, and language textbooks to understand and analyze the language's structure and usage. Inadequate materials in indigenous languages may not reflect the cultural nuances and contexts of the language. This can lead to a loss of cultural identity and the distortion of linguistic practices.

2.5 Shortage of qualified teachers proficient in indigenous languages

Qualified teachers are key to the success of the national language policy. There is a shortage of qualified teachers proficient in indigenous languages. The lack of qualified teachers in indigenous languages trained to effectively teach it effectively is a significant problem that contributes to the decline in the number of speakers because the children do not have the opportunity to learn their mother tongue in school, and eventually the death of mother tongue. The present direction of teacher training programs in Nigeria often prioritizes the usage of the English language for instruction, at the detriment of indigenous language. Investing in training programs to ensure that educators are proficient in indigenous languages, equipping them with effective teaching methods in mother tongue is an important part of effectively implementing the national language policy.

2.6 Over-concentration on school: Beyond the classroom

The policy focuses on the usage of indigenous languages in school, especially from primary 1-6. But the usage of mother tongue should not end in the classroom, but beyond it. The national language policy efforts outside the classroom in preserving mother tongue and revitalizing endangered languages requires a multifaceted approach that extends well beyond the classroom. This will foster a cultural environment where the language is valued and used in daily life, creating intergenerational transfer of the language.

For example, there are some Igbo words that are hardly heard or used in contemporary time, and have almost gone into extinction such as:

Njaá- a local pot used for boiling water used in bathing. (Ngwa dialect)

Udu mmiri- an earthen/clay pot used in storing drinking water (Igbo central)

Ogbunigwe- bomb used during the Biafra war (1967-1970) described so, because of its large scale destruction of human lives and properties.

Mkpochi- local latrine dug for the purpose passing faeces. (Ngor-okpala dialect)

These words are unlikely to be mentioned in the classroom and its usage in daily communication, leading to the gradual death of the various languages and dialects.

III. CONCLUSION

Nigeria's linguistic diversity is a source of cultural richness that must be preserved. Bridging the gap between theory and implementation of national language policy in Nigeria is a complex but a necessary and essential national task. To successfully implement language policies, the government must allocate adequate resources, to produce adequate instructional materials and train teachers in indigenous language. Also, the government and other stakeholders should step up their efforts outside of the classroom, as saving mother tongues and reviving endangered languages calls for a comprehensive strategy that goes far beyond the walls of the classroom. It entails building a cultural setting where the language is respected and used in everyday life, creating intergenerational connections, utilizing technology, and documenting linguistic resources. Only by tackling these issues will Nigeria be able to fully realize the benefits of its linguistic diversity and advance both national development and cultural preservation.

Recommendation

The paper makes the following recommendations on ways national language policy can be implemented to promote mother tongue revitalization in Nigeria:

- *Train more language teachers and documentation experts:* The federal government should design a scheme to train qualified teachers in indigenous languages. Training will produce qualified teachers who possess the knowledge, skills, and pedagogical techniques necessary to teach national languages in a way that maximizes learning outcomes for diverse learners. They will be equipped to design and deliver lessons that cater to students' linguistic needs, making mother tongue acquisition process more efficient and engaging. It is also important to state that in the modern era, technology plays a significant role in language education. Epepe, (2019) points out the relevance of digital technologies in the acquisition of indigenous language literacy in Nigeria and advocates for the integration of various digital technologies into formal indigenous language pedagogy. Qualified teachers can leverage digital resources, language-learning apps, and online platforms to enhance their teaching methods. These tools can make language learning more engaging and accessible, aligning with the goals

of language policies that aim to utilize technology for educational purposes. This is a vital step in the successful implementation of the national language policy. It will ensure inclusive education and help preserve the linguistic diversity of Nigeria, which is a source of her strength and pride.

- *Production and distribution of adequate instructional material*: The availability of adequate instructional materials especially from primary 1-6 in indigenous languages will play a pivotal role in the successful implementation of the national language policy. Language is at the core of education, and providing materials in the mother tongue of learners not only facilitates access to effective learning but also contributes to the preservation and promotion of indigenous languages. Also, by providing adequate instructional materials in indigenous languages, the government ensures that a broader segment of the population can participate in the educational system, and this aligns with the principles of inclusivity and equal access to education.
- *Community Engagement & Public Awareness Campaigns*: Implementing the national language policy should not only be directed at schools, as it a multifaceted effort that also requires community involvement. A national language policy as this should not be limited to formal education but extends into various aspects of daily life, including communities, media, and other public spaces. The federal and state governments should launch intensive campaigns to raise public awareness about the importance of the national language policy. Explain how it benefits individuals, communities, and the nation as a whole. Highlight success stories and the advantages of using indigenous language. Promoting the use of the national language(s) in the media is essential for language policy implementation. Public broadcasters (radio & TV) can play a pivotal role by offering news, programs, and content in various local languages spoken across the nation. Their input can provide valuable insights and ensure cultural relevance.
- *Monitoring and Evaluation*: after implementation, it is important to establish mechanisms for monitoring the progress of the language policy implementation. Regular evaluations can identify areas that require adjustment or improvement, which will lead to continuous improvements.

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