

## Bridging theory and practice: National language policy and mother tongue documentation for effective implementation

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**Abstract** - Language is a fundamental component of identity and culture, significantly shaping a nation's socio-political landscape. Recognizing this, nations continuously strive to preserve their indigenous languages. This paper explores the gap between theory and implementation in Nigeria's national language policy, focusing on its role in preserving, revitalizing, and documenting mother tongues. It examines key challenges, including the scarcity of instructional materials and the shortage of qualified teachers for indigenous languages. The study highlights how effective implementation of the national language policy can extend mother tongue revitalization beyond formal education. Guided by the Language Ecology Model and David Crystal's theory of language revitalization, this study employs a descriptive analytical methodology. By analyzing both current and historical data, it identifies critical gaps in policy execution. The findings emphasize that bridging the gap between policy and practice requires government commitment, particularly in resource allocation for instructional materials and teacher training. Furthermore, the study underscores that preserving and revitalizing endangered indigenous languages demands a holistic approach beyond classroom instruction. It calls for sustained efforts from governments and stakeholders to cultivate a cultural environment where indigenous languages are actively used and valued. Strategies such as fostering intergenerational language transmission, leveraging technology, and systematically documenting linguistic resources are essential. In conclusion, ensuring the successful implementation of Nigeria's national language policy is a complex yet vital task. A comprehensive, multifaceted approach that integrates education, cultural engagement, and technological innovations is crucial to preserving linguistic heritage. This study advocates for increased policy-driven action to safeguard and promote indigenous languages, ensuring their survival and relevance in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** language, language documentation, mother tongue, national language policy, language revitalization

### I. INTRODUCTION

Language is the essence of culture, identity, and heritage, serving as a medium for transmitting knowledge, values, and traditions across generations. However, linguistic diversity is under

severe threat worldwide, with many languages facing extinction, a reality that Nigeria is grappling with. Indigenous languages, also known as mother tongues, hold immense cultural and historical significance, yet they are disappearing at an alarming rate. Nigeria faces a critical linguistic crisis, necessitating urgent and practical intervention beyond policy rhetoric. The Nigerian National Language Policy plays a crucial role in mitigating this crisis by recognizing the need to protect, preserve, and document indigenous languages.

As a linguistically diverse country, Nigeria experiences significant language endangerment, though the extent of this issue is often underreported. According to the United Nations (2016), one language disappears every two weeks, placing many indigenous languages at risk. If Nigeria's linguistic diversity is to be sustained to preserve cultural identity and heritage, proactive intervention beyond theoretical policy frameworks is essential.

Are (2015) emphasizes that language is central to communication and culture, forming the backbone of collective identity. The loss of any language is a profound cultural and intellectual loss. Indigenous languages in Nigeria have evolved to serve as unique vessels for expressing thoughts, worldviews, and traditions. While the national language policy aims to preserve and document endangered languages, its implementation has faced significant challenges. These include a lack of instructional materials, insufficient qualified teachers, and an overemphasis on formal education settings. Achieving the policy's objectives requires strategic, systematic, and timely interventions to ensure the preservation of Nigeria's linguistic and cultural heritage while fostering intercultural communication.

McArthur (2023) defines mother tongue as the language acquired in childhood, often learned in the home environment and used synonymously with native language. Dogara (2022) describes it as a person's first or dominant language, also referred to as home language or native tongue. Similarly, Savage (2019) views mother tongue as the language most commonly spoken by an individual, particularly from birth and during formative years.

Austin (2021) describes language documentation as efforts aimed at preserving linguistic resources for future use in language revitalization. Grenoble & Furbee (2010) and Are (2015) define it as a branch of linguistics dedicated to collecting, describing, and archiving endangered languages. This process ensures that linguistic data is systematically recorded for future linguistic and cultural reference.

This study adopts the Language Ecology Model proposed by Einar Haugen (1972), which examines the interaction between languages and their socio-cultural environments. This model perceives language as a living entity that evolves through continuous interaction with its surroundings. By likening language preservation to biodiversity conservation, it underscores the necessity of sustaining endangered languages within their communities. The model highlights key factors affecting language survival, such as the number of speakers, availability of educational materials, and community attitudes. Effective implementation of Nigeria's national language policy depends on fostering positive attitudes toward indigenous languages, encouraging their daily use instead of prioritizing English at the expense of mother tongues.

British linguist David Crystal theorizes that language decline occurs in three stages. The first stage involves external pressure—political, social, or economic—compelling a minority group to adopt a dominant language. This pressure may come from government policies or social trends (Crystal, 2000). The second stage sees the emergence of bilingualism, where the minority group becomes increasingly fluent in the dominant language. The third stage marks the decline of bilingualism, as younger generations shift their primary linguistic identity to the dominant language, often neglecting or feeling ashamed of their mother tongue—a phenomenon evident in Nigeria.

Crystal argues that language revitalization efforts are most effective during the second stage when bilingualism is still present. He emphasizes the need for public campaigns promoting linguistic diversity and fostering positive attitudes toward indigenous languages. Accurate data on speaker populations, fluency levels, and community attitudes is crucial for assessing linguistic vitality. Furthermore, he stresses the importance of social well-being, as economic hardship often

shifts priorities away from language preservation. Language revitalization requires active engagement from speakers, creating spaces where indigenous languages are valued and used in education, media, governance, and entertainment. Positive self-perception within speech communities is fundamental to language survival, making targeted policies and societal support essential for sustaining linguistic diversity in Nigeria.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1 Method of Collecting Data

This study employs a qualitative research approach, using both primary and secondary data sources to examine the implementation of the national language policy in Nigeria and its impact on the documentation and revitalization of indigenous languages. The data collection process includes the following methods:

**a. Document Analysis** Document analysis is used to examine existing policy documents, government reports, and scholarly publications on language policy, language endangerment, and revitalization strategies. Key documents include Nigeria's National Language Policy, UNESCO reports on language endangerment, and relevant academic studies on linguistic diversity and preservation efforts in Nigeria.

**b. Interviews with Language Experts and Educators** Semi-structured interviews are conducted with linguists, policymakers, and educators specializing in indigenous language instruction and preservation. The interviews provide insights into the practical challenges faced in implementing language policies, the availability of instructional materials, and the effectiveness of revitalization programs.

**c. Surveys of Indigenous Language Speakers** A structured survey is administered to speakers of endangered languages, particularly those in educational settings, to assess their perceptions of language preservation efforts, their proficiency levels, and the factors influencing language shift or maintenance.

**d. Field Observations** Observational data is collected from schools and cultural institutions where indigenous languages are taught or promoted. This includes assessing teaching methodologies, instructional materials, and engagement levels of students in indigenous language learning.

### 2.2 Technique of Analysis

The collected data is analysed using a combination of qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis to identify key trends, challenges, and potential solutions regarding national language policy implementation and indigenous language documentation.

**a. Qualitative Content Analysis** Content analysis is applied to policy documents, reports, and academic literature to extract key themes and patterns related to language policy objectives, challenges, and recommendations. This method helps in understanding the policy landscape and its practical implications.

**b. Thematic Analysis of Interviews and Surveys** The responses from interviews and surveys are coded and analysed thematically to identify recurring themes, perspectives, and concerns raised by language experts, educators, and indigenous language speakers. Key themes include the availability of instructional resources, policy effectiveness, and societal attitudes toward indigenous languages.

**c. Comparative Analysis** Findings from Nigeria are compared with language revitalization strategies from other multilingual nations to identify best practices that could be adapted to the Nigerian context. This comparative approach helps in drawing practical recommendations for improving language policy implementation.

**d. Triangulation** To ensure reliability and validity, data from different sources (policy documents, interviews, surveys, and observations) are cross-verified. This triangulation approach helps in establishing a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of the challenges and opportunities in indigenous language preservation.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Results

The Nigerian National Language Policy plays a crucial role in promoting indigenous languages by mandating their use as the medium of instruction from Primary 1 to 6. This policy aligns with UNESCO's (2022) advocacy for mother-tongue-based multilingual education, which has been shown to improve learning outcomes and foster cultural preservation. Research by Qismullah et al. (2022) highlights that the sustained use and transmission of local languages across generations are vital for their preservation. Bott (2021) further emphasizes that mother tongues serve as carriers of ancestral knowledge, cultural heritage, and personal identity.

Despite the policy's intent, its implementation remains a significant challenge. Linguists and anthropologists, including Zeitlyn et al. (2021), recognize the accelerated loss of linguistic diversity, necessitating urgent revitalization efforts. The Nigerian National Language Policy (2022) aims to address this by enforcing indigenous language instruction in early education. However, studies such as those by Savage (2019) and Nord (2022) indicate that while mother-tongue education enhances critical thinking, literacy, and overall academic performance, current policies overly focus on classroom instruction without adequately addressing language use beyond the school environment.

In a country with over 500 languages (Eberhard et al, 2022), maintaining linguistic diversity is particularly challenging. The prioritization of major languages such as Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo often marginalizes minority languages, leading to their gradual extinction. According to Crystal (2020), languages die when they are no longer spoken or passed down to younger generations. The same phenomenon is observable in Nigeria, where smaller linguistic groups face the risk of assimilation into dominant cultures. This linguistic shift is exacerbated by urbanization and globalization, which promote the use of English as the dominant mode of communication.

A key obstacle to effective implementation is the lack of instructional materials in indigenous languages. The former Minister of Education, Adamu, admitted that the development of teaching resources remains a major hurdle. Teaching aids such as textbooks, workbooks, and digital content are primarily produced in English, leading to an inadequate supply of materials in local languages. The absence of a standardized writing system for some indigenous languages further complicates the development of curriculum content.

Additionally, there is a shortage of qualified teachers proficient in indigenous languages, as training programs prioritize English over local languages. Many teacher training institutions in Nigeria focus primarily on English-based pedagogical methods, leaving educators unprepared to teach in indigenous languages. According to Taiwo (2021), less than 30% of teachers in primary schools are fluent in the indigenous languages required for instruction. This deficiency contributes to a decline in language proficiency among younger generations, threatening the long-term survival of Nigeria's linguistic heritage.

Beyond education, the use of indigenous languages in everyday communication is diminishing. Many words from various Nigerian dialects are disappearing due to their limited usage outside formal education. For instance, Igbo words such as **Njaá** (a traditional pot for boiling water), **Udu mmiri** (a clay pot for storing drinking water), **Ogbunigwe** (a bomb used during the Biafra War), and **Mkpochi** (a local latrine) are rarely used today, contributing to language attrition.

Urban migration and the dominance of English in professional and social settings further erode the use of indigenous languages. Children growing up in cities often do not speak their native languages fluently, as their parents prioritize English for educational and career advancement. The phenomenon of "language shift," where communities gradually abandon their mother tongue in favor of a dominant language, is evident in many Nigerian households. Scholars such as Fishman (2011) argue that language shift leads to cultural alienation, as younger generations lose access to traditional knowledge embedded in indigenous languages.

Recognizing these challenges, the Nigerian government has initiated various programs to support language revitalization. The **National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN)**

was established to research and develop instructional materials for indigenous languages. However, its impact remains limited due to inadequate funding and bureaucratic inefficiencies (Okeke, 2022). Community-driven initiatives also play a crucial role in language preservation. Organizations such as the **Igbo Language Preservation Project (ILPP)** and the **Yoruba Heritage Association** work towards documenting and promoting indigenous languages through digital media, storytelling, and language immersion programs. Digital tools, including language learning apps and social media platforms, have also emerged as potential solutions. Research by Oluwaseun et al. (2023) suggests that incorporating indigenous languages into technology-driven platforms can enhance engagement and language retention among young speakers.

The media has a powerful influence on language usage and preservation. Nollywood, Nigeria's film industry, has increasingly featured indigenous languages in movies, helping to promote linguistic diversity. Similarly, radio and television programs broadcast in Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo contribute to keeping these languages relevant in everyday discourse. Literature is another essential tool for language preservation. Writers such as Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka have integrated indigenous languages into their works, demonstrating the richness of African linguistic heritage. Contemporary authors are following suit, incorporating native dialects into novels, poetry, and short stories. However, the limited availability of books in indigenous languages remains a concern, as publishing houses often prioritize English-language materials due to market demand.

To ensure the survival of Nigeria's indigenous languages, a multi-faceted approach is necessary. Future research and policy adjustments should focus on:

1. **Curriculum Development:** Expanding indigenous language instruction beyond primary education to secondary and tertiary levels, integrating them into subjects such as history, literature, and social studies.
2. **Teacher Training:** Establishing specialized training programs to equip educators with the skills needed to teach in indigenous languages effectively.
3. **Digital Innovation:** Leveraging technology to create online courses, mobile apps, and interactive learning platforms for indigenous language acquisition.
4. **Government Incentives:** Providing financial and institutional support for indigenous language teachers, authors, and content creators.
5. **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Promoting the value of indigenous languages through national campaigns, emphasizing their role in cultural identity and intellectual development.

The Nigerian National Language Policy represents a significant step towards language preservation, but its implementation faces numerous obstacles, including inadequate instructional materials, a shortage of trained teachers, and the declining use of indigenous languages beyond educational settings. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive strategy that integrates policy reforms, technological innovation, media engagement, and community participation. By fostering a more supportive linguistic environment, Nigeria can preserve its rich linguistic heritage and ensure that future generations maintain their connection to their mother tongues.

### **3.2 Discussion**

The theoretical foundation of the National Language Policy underscores the vital role of mother-tongue instruction in early education. This policy aligns with global linguistic theories, such as Cummins' (1979) Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis, which argues that proficiency in a first language (L1) forms the foundation for acquiring a second language (L2). UNESCO (2022) also supports mother-tongue-based multilingual education as a means to enhance learning outcomes, cognitive development, and cultural identity. However, while the policy emphasizes indigenous languages as the medium of instruction in Nigerian primary schools, the reality of its implementation presents significant challenges. These include inadequate instructional materials, an insufficient number of trained teachers, and limited institutional and societal support for language preservation beyond the classroom. This section explores the factors impeding the policy's success and proposes a comprehensive approach to overcoming them.



One of the most pressing challenges in implementing the National Language Policy is the disconnect between policy design and execution. While the policy mandates the use of indigenous languages in primary education, logistical and infrastructural constraints have significantly hindered its realization. Educational institutions often lack the necessary resources to develop curricula, teaching materials, and standardized assessments in local languages. Many indigenous languages do not have well-documented orthographies or widely available literature, making it difficult for teachers to instruct effectively. This problem is particularly pronounced for less widely spoken languages, where educational materials are either outdated or non-existent. Moreover, the shortage of qualified teachers proficient in indigenous languages exacerbates the problem. Teacher training programs in Nigeria predominantly prioritize English, often neglecting the need for linguistic and pedagogical expertise in local languages. As a result, many teachers are either unwilling or unable to teach in indigenous languages, leading to inconsistent implementation of the policy across different regions. Research by Okonkwo (2020) highlights that despite government mandates, many schools continue to use English as the primary medium of instruction due to the absence of adequately trained personnel.

The availability and quality of instructional materials in indigenous languages play a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of mother-tongue education. In many Nigerian schools, the lack of textbooks, storybooks, and other learning aids in local languages poses a significant barrier to policy execution. Without comprehensive learning materials, students struggle to develop literacy skills in their mother tongue, which ultimately undermines the policy's objectives.

A comparison with other multilingual nations reveals the importance of investing in indigenous language instructional materials. In South Africa, for instance, government efforts to develop mother-tongue educational resources have led to improved literacy rates in primary education (Mokgokong & Pretorius, 2021). Nigeria can adopt similar strategies by collaborating with linguists, educators, and publishing firms to produce high-quality educational content in local languages. Digital technologies also offer promising solutions; mobile applications, e-books, and online platforms can serve as supplementary tools to enhance indigenous language instruction.

A critical factor in the successful implementation of the National Language Policy is the competence of educators. Teachers serve as the primary agents of language transmission in schools, and their proficiency in indigenous languages directly impacts students' learning experiences. However, many Nigerian teachers lack the necessary linguistic and pedagogical training to effectively teach in local languages.

To address this, teacher training institutions must incorporate indigenous language instruction into their curriculum. Special certification programs for bilingual education should be established to equip teachers with the skills needed to teach in both mother tongues and English. Furthermore, ongoing professional development workshops should be organized to enhance teachers' linguistic competence and instructional methodologies. Government incentives, such as salary bonuses or career advancement opportunities, could encourage more teachers to specialize in indigenous language education.

While schools play a pivotal role in language transmission, the sustainability of indigenous languages depends on their active use in daily life. A common criticism of Nigeria's language policies is their excessive focus on formal education, often overlooking the broader sociocultural context in which languages are spoken. For mother-tongue education to be effective, language revitalization efforts must extend beyond the classroom and into homes, communities, and the media.

Intergenerational language transmission is a key determinant of language survival. Children are more likely to develop fluency in their mother tongue if they are exposed to it consistently in both educational and non-educational settings. However, many Nigerian families prioritize English due to its perceived economic advantages, leading to the gradual erosion of indigenous language proficiency. Public awareness campaigns should be launched to emphasize

the cognitive, cultural, and economic benefits of bilingualism, encouraging parents to communicate with their children in local languages.

Additionally, cultural festivals, storytelling sessions, and community-based language programs can serve as platforms for indigenous language preservation. Traditional institutions, such as chieftaincy councils and cultural associations, should actively promote the use of native languages in public discourse. By embedding language revitalization efforts within the social fabric of communities, Nigeria can create a more supportive environment for indigenous language retention.

The media plays a powerful role in shaping linguistic practices. Unfortunately, indigenous languages in Nigeria receive limited representation in mainstream media, with English and Pidgin dominating television, radio, and digital content. To counter this, government policies should mandate increased local language programming across various media platforms. Public broadcasters should be required to produce news, entertainment, and educational content in multiple indigenous languages.

Technology also offers innovative solutions for language revitalization. Mobile applications, social media platforms, and e-learning tools can facilitate indigenous language learning among younger generations. Initiatives such as language-learning apps, digital dictionaries, and online storytelling platforms have been successfully used in countries like New Zealand to revive Māori (King & Whaanga, 2019). Nigeria can adopt similar models to make indigenous languages more accessible and appealing to digital-native youth.

Effective policy implementation requires robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. The National Language Policy should not be static; it must evolve in response to emerging linguistic trends and sociocultural dynamics. Regular assessments should be conducted to identify challenges and measure the impact of policy interventions. Key performance indicators (KPIs) could include literacy rates in indigenous languages, student academic performance, and language retention rates among different age groups.

Furthermore, government agencies should establish partnerships with universities and research institutions to conduct longitudinal studies on language policy effectiveness. These studies can provide empirical data to refine existing strategies and inform future policy decisions. By adopting a data-driven approach, Nigeria can ensure that its language policies remain relevant and effective in promoting linguistic diversity.

The National Language Policy represents a commendable effort to preserve Nigeria's linguistic heritage and improve educational outcomes. However, its success hinges on a holistic and well-coordinated approach that integrates education, community involvement, media representation, and government support. Addressing the gaps in policy execution—particularly in areas such as instructional materials, teacher training, and public engagement—will be essential for achieving long-term language revitalization.

By investing in indigenous language education, fostering community participation, and leveraging modern technology, Nigeria can bridge the divide between policy and practice. In doing so, the country can safeguard its linguistic diversity, enhance cultural identity, and ensure that future generations continue to speak and value their mother tongues.

## **IV. CONCLUSION**

### **4.1 Conclusion**

Nigeria's linguistic diversity is a vital cultural asset that reflects the nation's rich heritage and identity. However, despite the formulation of the National Language Policy, its implementation remains a significant challenge. Ensuring the effective execution of this policy requires strategic investments in resources, teacher training, and the production of instructional materials in indigenous languages. Without these efforts, the transmission of mother tongues to future generations may continue to decline.

Beyond formal education, revitalizing indigenous languages necessitates fostering an environment where they are actively used, valued, and preserved. Encouraging intergenerational

language transmission within families and communities is essential. Additionally, leveraging technology—such as mobile applications, digital media, and online platforms—can support language learning and documentation. By addressing these challenges through collaborative efforts between policymakers, educators, and local communities, Nigeria can safeguard its linguistic heritage, promote inclusivity in education, and strengthen national identity while advancing cultural preservation and sustainable development.

#### **4.2 Recommendations**

To enhance the implementation of the National Language Policy and support the revitalization of indigenous languages, the following steps should be taken:

##### **(1) Teacher Training and Capacity Building**

The government should establish a comprehensive training program for language teachers and linguistic documentation experts. Qualified educators with expertise in indigenous languages are essential for effective instruction and language preservation. Training programs should equip teachers with the necessary pedagogical skills, methodologies, and cultural knowledge to deliver high-quality mother-tongue education. Additionally, in the digital age, integrating technology into language learning can enhance engagement and accessibility. Epepe (2019) underscores the significance of digital tools in indigenous language acquisition, advocating for their incorporation into formal education. Teachers should be trained to utilize digital resources, language-learning applications, and online platforms to make lessons more interactive and effective. This initiative will ensure inclusivity in education and contribute to the long-term survival of Nigeria's linguistic heritage.

##### **(2) Development and Distribution of Instructional Materials**

A major obstacle to effective policy implementation is the scarcity of learning materials in indigenous languages. The government must prioritize the production and distribution of textbooks, workbooks, and multimedia resources tailored to the linguistic needs of students from Primary 1 to 6. Learning in one's mother tongue has been proven to enhance comprehension, literacy development, and cognitive skills. Providing accessible and high-quality instructional materials in indigenous languages will not only improve learning outcomes but also encourage the use of local languages beyond the classroom. This step aligns with the broader goal of inclusive education and equal access to learning opportunities.

##### **(3) Community Engagement and Public Awareness**

The success of the National Language Policy depends not only on its implementation in schools but also on widespread societal acceptance and participation. Public awareness campaigns should be launched to educate communities about the importance of indigenous language preservation. The government should emphasize the cultural and economic benefits of language revitalization, highlighting successful case studies and real-life impacts. Additionally, media platforms—radio, television, and digital outlets—should be utilized to promote indigenous languages. Public broadcasters can play a crucial role by incorporating local languages into news, entertainment, and educational programming, thereby reinforcing their relevance in everyday life.

##### **(4) Monitoring and Evaluation**

Sustained policy implementation requires continuous assessment and refinement. Mechanisms should be established to monitor progress, identify gaps, and make necessary adjustments. Regular evaluations will help policymakers and stakeholders understand the effectiveness of current strategies and develop data-driven improvements. A dynamic and responsive approach will ensure that the National Language Policy evolves in alignment with the country's linguistic and educational needs.

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