

The Relevance of Cultural Diversity and Language Education in Nigeria's Educational System

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Abstract. *With more than 250 ethnic groups and more than 500 indigenous languages, Nigeria's educational system functions in a very multicultural and multilingual environment. For the advancement of education, this diversity offers both possibilities and difficulties. In addition to preparing students for engagement in a globalized world, cultural diversity and language instruction are essential for promoting inclusivity, social cohesiveness, and national identity. This article explored the relevance of cultural diversity and language instruction in Nigeria's educational system. It also examined the historical influence of culture on educational policies, benefits of integrating cultural diversity, importance of language education as well as strategies for effective investment in language education. The study maintained that Language instruction and cultural diversity are essential to Nigeria's educational system's efficacy and inclusivity. Thus, the study makes the case for resource investment in indigenous language education, strong teacher preparation for multilingual and multicultural pedagogy, and curriculum reforms that take cultural plurality into account. In conclusion, it is imperative that Nigeria's educational system improve its language instruction and cultural diversity which offers a way to create a society that is more sustainable, cohesive, and inclusive, where education acts as a unifying factor and an instrument for empowerment.*

Key words: *Cultural Diversity, Language Education, Nigeria, Multilingualism, Educational System.*

Introduction

Nigeria is widely recognized for its linguistic and cultural diversity, with over 250 ethnic groups and more than 500 indigenous languages, spread across six geopolitical regions . As such, the Nigerian education system is a unique context where linguistic and cultural diversity significantly impacts the educational experience of its students. Language in this context refers not only to the language of instruction at various educational levels but also to the languages taught and learned within the national system . This review will focus on the use of languages in education, particularly in instructional practices and the use of teaching aids. Multilingualism, as defined in the *Encyclopedia*, involves the use of more than one language by a speaker, which in turn defines the concept of multilingual education .

Language education, a structured process aimed at developing communication skills, identity, and cognitive abilities, intersects with cultural diversity, which refers to the variety of traditions, beliefs, values, and practices in a society . Due to Nigeria's colonial past, English has been marginalized as the official language, sparking ongoing debates about the role of native languages in education. The connection between culture and language in education holds particular significance. According to the National Policy on Education in Nigeria, English and other local or foreign languages should be introduced after mother-tongue education in the early years of primary school. However, societal

preference for English, along with challenges like teacher competency and resource scarcity, results in uneven implementation .

The importance of cultural diversity and language education cannot be overstated, as they play key roles in preserving Nigeria's heritage and fostering social inclusion. Additionally, they equip students to become global citizens . Language also serves as a vessel for carrying cultural values and identity beyond the classroom. A closer examination of how cultural diversity and language education are integrated into Nigeria's educational system is crucial for enhancing educational success, strengthening national unity, and promoting long-term development. This article discusses the importance of language teaching and cultural diversity in the Nigerian education system, exploring the benefits, challenges, and the policy implications for creating an inclusive and effective educational environment .

Cultural Diversity in Nigeria's Educational System

Since Nigeria has over 250 ethnic groups and over 500 languages and its six geopolitical zones, it is one of the most culturally diverse societies on the continent [1]. There are many minorities that have their own customs, languages, and worldviews as well as large ethnicities, including Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo. The education system in Nigeria is also characterized by this variety of cultures because it allows students to introduce diverse backgrounds and views into the classroom.

Cultural diversity, which can be defined as the existence and interaction of various cultural groups in the specific society or organization, includes differences in language, religion, values, customs, and social practices [2]. It is equitable and inclusive as it recognizes the presence of different cultural identities, and it lays much emphasis on the respect of individual differences. The ability to appreciate and notice the special backgrounds that the communities, educators, and students bring is an important aspect of cultural diversity in education.

Historical Influence of Culture on Educational Policies

Cultural factors have historically influenced education in Nigeria. Before colonization, indigenous education was based on oral traditions and apprenticeships, as well as group work to pass on cultural values, moral teachings, and vocational skills [3]. Western education and the English language that followed had a side effect of marginalizing these languages of indigenous knowledge. The national policy on education and other post-independence policies have tried to correct this imbalance by establishing the value of native languages and culture. However, the prevailing presence of the Western model of education practices has sustained the imbalanced practice [4].

Scope of Cultural Diversity

Cultural diversity in schooling takes the form of pedagogy, curriculum planning, instructional language, teacher-student interactions, and relationships with the communities. It is the process of incorporating the cultural lens into teaching materials, the use of inclusive teaching approaches, and the establishment of a classroom environment that will make every student feel appreciated and represented [5]. The issue of cultural diversity also affects the educational goals and policy structures of the nation outside the classroom, especially in pluralistic societies like Nigeria.

Manifestations of Cultural Diversity in Education

As UNESCO explains, cultural diversity in education takes many forms that are interconnected with each other:

1. Multilingual classrooms where students use different mother tongues, and the language teaching methods should be language sensitive.
2. The contents of the curriculum, whether locally based on local histories, customs, and cultural values or not.
3. Pedagogical teaching methods adapting to different learning requirements using culturally sensitive or multicultural instructions.

4. Social, religious, or ethnic backgrounds are some of the social aspects that define the interactions among students, peer relationships, and interracial communication.
5. Policy action to embrace diversity in terms of diversity-based policies in inclusive education, teacher training, and curriculum.

Recognizing and making use of cultural diversity, education systems are capable of cultivating tolerance, respect for each other, and unity within the nation, and preparing students with intercultural competencies that they need to become global citizens [6].

Benefits of Integrating Cultural Diversity

The integration of cultural diversity in the classroom offers several benefits:

1. It fosters intercultural competence and tolerance by promoting respect among students from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, preparing them to coexist peacefully in a pluralistic society [7].
2. It facilitates societal integration by ensuring minority cultures are represented and valued in the educational programs and teaching methods.
3. It can also enhance students' openness and sense of belonging, enriching their educational experience by broadening their perspectives and connecting classroom knowledge to real-life situations.

Language Education

Language serves as a crucial indicator of social behavior, and studies on language use in society provide valuable insights into various aspects of social interactions and processes [8]. According to Egbe [9], Nigeria exemplifies one of the most complex ethnolinguistic environments in Africa. The concept of linguistic landscape has prompted scholars to conduct research in various locations, emphasizing its importance in such settings. Visible language, whether on signs or other forms of public display, can be analyzed to study public spaces. Nigeria, a multilingual and multicultural nation, faces a particularly intricate linguistic situation due to the increasing variety of languages spoken in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) of Abuja and the 36 states.

Language Education in Nigeria

Language education is the systematic teaching and learning of languages, which includes mother tongues, second languages, and foreign languages. This process involves developing skills such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing, while also enhancing cultural and communicative competence [10]. In Nigeria, English serves as the official language for government and education, taught alongside indigenous languages in a multilingual environment. With over 500 indigenous languages across the country, Nigeria represents one of the most linguistically diverse regions globally [11]. Despite the prevalence of many minority languages, the three major languages—Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo—dominate in the northern, southwestern, and southeastern regions of the country, respectively. The diversity in student linguistic backgrounds poses both opportunities and challenges for language learning in schools.

Nigerian Education's Language Policies

The National Policy on Education (NPE), first adopted in 1977 and subsequently revised, has played a crucial role in shaping the language policy in education. According to the NPE, the first three years of primary education should be conducted in the mother tongue or a local language, with the remaining years taught in English [12]. In junior secondary schools, students are also expected to learn one of the three major languages spoken in Nigeria. Empirical studies have shown that children learn most effectively in their first language during the early years of education, highlighting the importance of the mother tongue in early childhood education. Teaching in the native language enhances understanding, cognitive development, and emotional engagement with the learning material [13]. In Nigeria, the preservation of culture and the formation of identities are facilitated through the use of native languages, allowing students to connect with their cultural heritage while

engaging with educational content. Although the policy supports both English and indigenous languages, challenges in the political, social, and resource sectors have led to inconsistent implementation. The National Language Policy (NLP) aims to promote national peace and unity within a democratic and sovereign nation, emphasizing equality, justice, and freedom [14].

Importance of Language Education

1. It opens the world of global knowledge and resources:

Multilingualism provides students with access to international literature, research, and technology, thereby expanding their worldview and enhancing their academic experience. English, being the global leader in language, offers the most access to information and educational materials [15].

2. It boosts employability and job opportunities:

Multilingualism significantly increases employment prospects. According to Global Scholar [16], multilingual individuals possess a competitive edge in fields such as international business, diplomacy, and tourism.

3. It fosters interethnic awareness and cooperation:

Language instruction promotes interethnic understanding and cooperation by encouraging multilingualism and intercultural exchange. Being proficient in more than one language increases cultural literacy and reduces prejudice, fostering more harmonious relations among diverse groups in Nigeria [17].

4. It attracts foreign investment:

Effective communication and negotiation skills, which are only possible with a multilingual workforce, play a crucial role in attracting foreign direct investment (FDI). Countries proficient in multiple languages engage more effectively in international trade, thus improving their economic opportunities. Language education can make Nigeria more attractive to foreign investors [18].

5. It increases tourism:

Tourists prefer to visit places where they can communicate with locals. Blench [5] suggests that promoting foreign language proficiency enhances visitor satisfaction and experience, thereby strengthening the tourism industry.

6. It protects linguistic and cultural heritage:

Education plays a key role in preserving Nigeria's rich linguistic and cultural heritage. By integrating indigenous languages and cultures into educational curricula, future generations can safeguard these cultural resources [19]. Language diversity is central to maintaining both cultural and linguistic diversity.

7. It contributes to national unity and social cohesion:

Encouraging mutual respect and understanding among linguistic groups fosters national identity and social unity. A common language helps bridge ethnic divisions, as discussed by Bamgbose [20]. Education in multiple native languages and a national language can create a unified society where everyone feels valued.

8. It improves cognitive abilities and academic performance:

Studies consistently show that bilingualism or multilingualism enhances cognitive abilities and academic performance. Multilingual individuals tend to have better memory, creativity, and problem-solving skills, which are reflected in their school performance.

9. It promotes flexibility and lifelong learning:

Language education fosters critical thinking, communication, and cultural awareness, all of which benefit personal and professional growth. These skills help individuals adapt to changing environments and continue learning in a rapidly evolving world [21].

Strategies for Effective Investment in Language Education:

i. Establishing a comprehensive language policy:

A detailed language policy is essential for effective language acquisition. The policy should be inclusive and representative of the country's linguistic diversity, as noted by Deynolds [22], and stakeholders must conduct needs assessments to ensure its sustainability and fairness.

ii. Incorporating indigenous languages in the national curriculum:

Incorporating indigenous languages into the national curriculum helps preserve linguistic heritage and promotes social inclusion. Tsaure and Sani [9] argue that indigenous language education is vital for academic achievement and should be integrated at all educational levels.

iii. Making language learning mandatory at all levels:

Mandating language education ensures uniformity in language competence across the nation. This approach promotes the development of a multilingual population capable of engaging in diverse social and economic settings.

iv. Enhancing resources from the public and private sectors:

Language education programs require strong investment from both the public and private sectors. Osuji et al. [23] highlight that targeted investments in language training yield long-term socioeconomic benefits.

v. Offering professional development opportunities for teachers:

Language instructors should be continuously engaged in professional development to keep up with pedagogical advancements. Collin, Heijden, and Lewis [24] recommend conferences, communities of practice, and continued learning to enhance teaching effectiveness.

vi. Utilizing digital platforms and technology in language learning:

Digital applications and online resources provide flexible and interactive ways to learn new languages. These tools can improve students' language learning experiences by making them more engaging and accessible.

vii. Establishing language teacher training institutions:

Specialized teacher-training institutions are essential for equipping educators with the skills needed to teach languages and be culturally competent. O'Sullivan [25] argues that teachers must undergo specialized training to foster a conducive learning environment.

viii. Promoting cooperation between the community and the business sector:

Collaboration between communities, businesses, and NGOs can significantly enhance the scope and effectiveness of language education interventions. Baker [26] asserts that multisector partnerships are crucial for solving educational challenges and ensuring sustainable development.

ix. Rewarding skilled teachers with incentives and remunerations:

To attract and retain high-quality language teachers, competitive salaries and incentives should be provided. Li and Tim [27] argue that financial incentives and professional development opportunities enhance teacher retention and improve the quality of education.

x. Engaging local communities in language learning initiatives:

Involving local communities in language education fosters a respectful and inclusive classroom environment. Sarbunan [28] emphasizes that communities should contribute to designing culturally responsive curricula and assist in language maintenance.

xi. Disseminating information on the benefits of multilingualism:

Raising awareness about the cognitive, social, and economic benefits of multilingualism can garner support for language education programs. Public campaigns and media outreach can encourage the acceptance and promotion of multilingual education [29].

Linking Language, Culture, and Learning

Language, culture, and learning are intricately connected, forming the foundation of knowledge production and dissemination. Culture shapes the use of language and determines how meaning is represented, while language facilitates communication and knowledge creation, acting as a mediator in the learning process. Learning integrates linguistic and cultural contexts, which significantly impact the absorption, processing, and application of information [1]. This connection underscores the importance of incorporating language learning and cultural diversity into the educational process, particularly in a multicultural and multilingual nation like Nigeria. This approach promotes solidarity, identification, and cultural competence among intercultural groups, enhancing educational outcomes.

Language and Culture: Language develops within a cultural context, giving words, signs, and phrases meaning. In turn, language serves as a cultural vehicle, transmitting traditions and identity across generations [2]. In Nigeria's native languages, elements such as proverbs, idioms, and oral traditions carry cultural wisdom and values, which are crucial for moral education and socialization.

Language and Learning: Since language is the primary medium of instruction in educational institutions, it plays a vital role in achieving learning goals. Early instruction in native languages enhances students' understanding, creativity, and cognitive development, as opposed to instruction in foreign languages [3]. However, language barriers can hinder self-expression, participation, and equal access to education.

Culture and Learning: Cultural orientations influence learning processes, including classroom interactions, respect for authority, and individual versus communal learning styles. Pedagogy and curricula rooted in cultural contexts are more engaging and motivating for learners, increasing their likelihood of success [4]. By connecting students' cultural knowledge with academic content, culturally responsive teaching creates inclusive learning environments.

The Relevance of Cultural Diversity and Language Education:

1. **Encouraging Harmony Among Differences:** In Nigeria's pluralistic society, cultural diversity and language teaching are key to fostering national cohesion. When schools integrate ethnic identities and languages into the curriculum, they become spaces that recognize students' cultural backgrounds, promoting harmony and reducing ethnocentric divisions [5].

2. **Improving Students' Self-Expression, Pride, and Identity:** Language not only serves as a communication tool but also expresses culture. Teaching in native languages and reflecting cultural identity in the classroom enhances students' self-worth and cultural pride [6]. This fosters genuine self-expression and prevents alienation, allowing students to speak globally without losing their cultural identity.

3. **Increasing Equity and Inclusive Education:** Integrating language education and cultural diversity into the school system ensures that no group is excluded from the learning process. Teaching indigenous languages reduces barriers, particularly in early childhood education, and allows students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access knowledge [3]. Culturally responsive teaching further promotes inclusivity by recognizing the diverse experiences of students and reducing structural inequalities [4].

4. **Preparing Students for Intercultural Competence and Global Citizenship:** In a globalized world, intercultural competence is as crucial as academic knowledge. Language teaching enhances flexibility, teamwork, and communication across national and cultural borders [7]. Exposure to cultural diversity in the classroom fosters critical thinking, empathy, and tolerance—skills essential for global citizenship.

5. **Promoting Sustainable National Development:** A nation cannot achieve long-term development without language education and cultural diversity. By preserving native languages and cultures, Nigeria protects its intangible heritage and leverages linguistic resources for social progress and creativity [8]. Inclusive education contributes to the development of tolerant, socially responsible citizens who can support democratic governance and economic development.

The government, schools, and communities must collaborate to implement successful policies. The government needs to hire and train bilingual educators, allocate funds for local language resources, and oversee policy implementation. Communities play an essential role in preserving indigenous knowledge and ensuring that cultural practices are incorporated into education [8]. Involving the community makes educational policies sustainable and contextually relevant.

Challenges of Cultural Diversity and Language Education:

1. Resource Limitations (Books, Trained Teachers): The lack of resources and untrained teachers poses a significant challenge to teaching Nigerian languages and cultural diversity. The absence of standardized orthographies, textbooks, and teaching materials in many indigenous languages impedes the effective implementation of mother-tongue education [9]. Additionally, there is a shortage of educators trained in bilingual or multilingual pedagogy. A potential solution is for the government to invest in creating local language resources and curricula, with input from language experts and the local community [4].

2. Addressing Language Dominance and Improving Equity:

English has gained a privileged status as the official instructional language in Nigeria, often at the expense of indigenous languages. While English promotes cross-border communication, its dominance threatens the survival of indigenous languages [8]. To ensure equity, bilingual education should be implemented, where English is taught alongside native languages, allowing students to gain proficiency in both without losing their cultural identity [3].

3. Bridging Cultural and Linguistic Gaps Between Rural and Urban Areas:

Rural schools often rely on indigenous languages due to limited exposure to English, while urban schools prioritize English to meet socioeconomic expectations. Adegbite [10] argues that this divide exacerbates educational disparities between urban and rural students. Addressing these gaps requires a context-sensitive education policy that ensures linguistic and cultural representation in urban schools and provides adequate resources for teaching indigenous languages in rural areas. Strengthening community-school collaborations and improving teacher deployment can also help bridge these divides.

Conclusion

The education system in Nigeria cannot be effective and inclusive without language education and cultural diversity. Nigerian states with more than 500 languages and 250 ethnic groups represent miniature models of multilingual and multicultural identity of the country. When such diversities are identified and integrated in the learning process, the learning outcomes will be enhanced as well as the retention of the indigenous knowledge and practices. Other than academic success, language teaching and cultural diversity act as tools of fostering tolerance, reduction of ethnic boundaries as well as reinforcement of unity in diversity. To improve equity and inclusivity in the educational system, it is important that students regardless of cultural or linguistic diversity feel represented and valued by the system. In addition to that, such factors also facilitate national development through provision of intercultural competence, communication skills and cultural pride to the citizens at the long-term levels of social and economic growth. Nigeria needs to move past formulation of policies to successful execution of these strategies to benefit optimally on the same. This calls for resource investments in indigenous language education, strong teacher preparation for multilingual and multicultural pedagogy, and curriculum reforms that take cultural plurality into account. Additionally, community involvement is crucial because schools that collaborate with local communities are better able to preserve and transmit cultural knowledge and linguistic heritage. In conclusion, it is imperative that Nigeria's educational system improve its language instruction and cultural diversity which offers a way to create a society that is more sustainable, cohesive, and inclusive, where education acts as a unifying factor and an instrument for empowerment.

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