

## **POLICY PROVISIONS ON LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION AND CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION BY LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN BASIC EDUCATION SCHOOLS IN NIGERIA**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the policy provisions on the language of instruction and curriculum implementation by language teachers in basic education schools in Nigeria, as stipulated in the National Policy on Education (NPE, 2014): three languages for Basic 1-3, four languages for Basic 4-6, and in upper basic education schools. The objective of this paper is to outline the languages stipulated in the curriculum for the comprehension of language teachers in basic education schools and to clearly state the language of the curriculum used as a medium of instruction, as enshrined in the language policy in Nigeria. The paper compares the policy statements on language in NPE 2004 and NPE 2014, highlighting major changes in the provisions on the language of instruction and curriculum implementation. It discusses the challenges posed by the language policy, its educational implications, and provides recommendations, such as the need for the policy to establish a more adaptable framework that allows for regional modifications based on the linguistic needs of pupils. This would enable local educational authorities to tailor language instruction to their specific contexts. Additionally, the government should provide targeted teacher training and resources to equip language teachers with the necessary skills and tools to effectively teach in indigenous languages. This could involve language-specific professional development programs and the creation of indigenous language teaching materials.*

**Keywords:** Language in the curriculum, language of the Curriculum, Language of Instruction, National Policy on Education

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### **Introduction**

Education and linguistics experts universally agree that instructing children in their native language gives them the best chance for academic success. This approach has been discussed for years as a means to alleviate the educational challenges faced by children from indigenous minority groups (Pinnock, 2009). The significance of education cannot be overstated, as it serves as the foundation for a nation's social and economic development. Nigeria acknowledges the critical role of education in both national and human development, which is why it sets goals, expectations, and standards for delivering quality education to its citizens (Shallah, 2016). These strategies are outlined in the National Policy on Education (2014). The country's educational system has been restructured as follows:

Early Childcare Development for children aged 0-4 years;

Basic Education for children aged 5-15 years, including 1 year of Pre-Primary, 6 years of Primary Education, and 3 years of Junior Secondary Education;  
Post-Basic Education, consisting of 3 years in Senior Secondary Schools and Technical Colleges;  
Tertiary Education, offered in Colleges of Education, Monotechnic, Polytechnics, and Universities (National Policy on Education, 2014).

In Nigeria, the language policy in education dates back to the colonial period, when in 1927, the British Advisory Committee on Native Education in Tropical Africa recommended using indigenous languages as the medium of instruction in the early years of primary education (Musa, 2010). The language policy in education, which has undergone numerous stages, remains a critical contemporary issue in Nigeria, a country with over 500 indigenous languages spoken across its diverse and multi-ethnic landscape (Blench, 2002). Prior to the National Policy on Education's advocacy for the use of indigenous languages at the basic education level, English served as the primary medium of instruction.

A policy serves as a guiding principle or protocol that directs decisions to achieve rational outcomes. Language policy specifically refers to the strategic planning of language-related matters as dictated by the government. Jalaluddeen and Sadiya (2016) describe policy as an overarching guide that establishes the general boundaries and direction for administrative actions. Amuseghan (2006) defines language policy as deliberate governmental efforts to influence the structure and use of various language forms. In the context of Nigeria's education system, literacy begins when a child connects the concept behind a word with its written form. If a child cannot grasp the meaning of a word due to it being in an unfamiliar language, learning to 'read and write' that word does not equate to true literacy; it is merely rote memorization. This is why, in Nigeria, the roles and functions of languages are categorized under these recognized groups: (1) Indigenous languages; (2) English language; (3) Pidgin English; and (4) Foreign languages (French and Classical Arabic). Against this backdrop, this paper explores the position of language policy statements within the curriculum and the curriculum itself.

### **The Position of Policy Provisions on Language of Instruction**

Before delving into the discussion on the position of policy statements within the curriculum, it is crucial to first understand the term 'curriculum.' As formal education has expanded globally, finding a precise and suitable definition of 'curriculum' has become increasingly important. A curriculum encompasses all the selected, organized, integrative, innovative, and evaluative educational experiences provided to learners, either consciously or unconsciously, under school authority. These experiences aim to achieve designated learning outcomes that result from growth, maturation, and learning, ultimately preparing individuals for life in a changing society (Innocent, 2018). In essence, the curriculum can be viewed as both planned and unplanned experiences that a child encounters within and outside the school environment.

On the other hand, a language policy is a set of principles agreed upon by stakeholders, guiding decision-making on language and literacy issues across all levels of formal education, including early childhood, primary, secondary, and teacher education at the tertiary level (National Policy on Education, 2014). It addresses the

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nation's language needs across various communities and cultural groups, evaluates available resources, identifies the role of language in national life, and outlines strategies for managing and developing language resources. These strategies are implemented through appropriate planning agencies to serve the nation's best interests.

The National Policy on Education (NPE) serves as the national framework for the effective administration, management, and implementation of education across all levels of government in Nigeria. It outlines the intentions, expectations, goals, prescriptions, standards, and requirements necessary for delivering quality education in the country. Within this context, the National Policy on Education (2014) specifies the languages to be included in the curriculum for students at various educational levels, from lower basic to upper basic and senior secondary schools.

For Basic 1-3, the curriculum mandates the study of three languages: English, one Nigerian language, and Arabic (as an optional subject). In Basic 4-6, the curriculum includes English, one Nigerian language, French, and Arabic. At the upper basic level, students study English, one Nigerian language, French, and Arabic (optional). At the senior secondary level, the policy designates English as a compulsory cross-cutting subject, with French, Arabic, and any Nigerian language that has an established curriculum as additional fields of study. Senior secondary students are required to take four compulsory cross-cutting subjects: English, General Mathematics, Trade/Entrepreneurship, and Civic Education. Notably, the policy consistently mentions four languages (English, one Nigerian language, French, and Arabic) at all educational levels except for Basic 1-3, where only three languages (English, one Nigerian language, and Arabic) are specified.

### **The Position of Language Policy of the Curriculum Implementation**

Selecting the language for education is crucial because it can significantly influence how students learn. Every language in the world represents a distinct culture, melody, and richness that adds value to human life, and this should be taken into account when making educational decisions. Indigenous languages, in particular, are invaluable assets. Recognizing their importance and the significance of the language of the immediate environment, Nigeria has decided to use these as the medium of instruction, at least during the early years of basic education. This means that every child will be taught in their mother tongue or the language of their immediate community during the first four years of basic education.

*“Every child shall be taught in the mother Tongue the language of immediate community for the first four (4) years of basic education” (FME 2013: Sec. 15 Paragraph g)*

This has explained the implementation strategy for the policy and will continue into the basic education for at least in the first three (3) years after which English shall be taught as subject

*“The medium of Instruction in Primary school shall be the language of immediate environment (Mother tongue inclusive) for the first three (3) years in monolingual*

*communities. During this period, English shall be taught as subject” (FME 2013: sec. 24Paragraph d).*

To grasp the current stance of the policy statement on language within the curriculum, as well as the curriculum itself, it is helpful to first examine some key changes introduced in the NPE 2013.

### **Comparison of Language Provision in 2004 NPE And 2014 NPE**

Nigeria’s National Policy on Education (NPE) was first adopted in 1977, with revisions made in 1981, 1998, 2004, and 2007. The most recent version was published in 2013. The language provisions in the NPE are integrated throughout the document, rather than being concentrated in a single section. Several changes regarding language use in educational settings distinguish the 2014 version from the 2004 version. Three significant changes are particularly noteworthy: (1) the removal of Section 1.10, titled "The Importance of Language," from Section 1, which deals with the Philosophy and Goals of Education in Nigeria; (2) the elimination of specific requirements for learning Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba; and (3) the restriction of instruction in the Language of the Immediate Environment (LIE) to monolingual communities.

The key changes in the policy statement on language, as reflected in the curriculum, are summarized in Table 1 below:

**Table 1: Comparison of Language Provisions in 2004 NPE and 2014 NPE**

<b>2004 NPE</b>	<b>2014 NPE</b>
Section 1.10: Every child is required to learn ‘one of the three Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba’  Section 5.24 and 5.25: ‘One major Nigerian language’ listed as a core subject for junior and senior secondary school	Section 1.10 does not appear  No reference in the document to Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba or ‘major Nigerian languages’  Junior and secondary school subject lists include ‘one Nigerian language’
Section 1.10: ‘every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment’	Section 1.8: ‘Every child shall be taught in the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community for the first four years of basic education’ [including pre-primary and P1–P3]
Section 2.14: Pre-primary education is to be carried out in the mother tongue or ‘the language of the immediate community’	Section 2.16: For early childhood care development and education, ‘Government will ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community’
Section 4.19: ‘The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject’	Section 2.20: ‘The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years in monolingual communities [author’s emphasis]. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject’

From P4 to P6, 'language of the immediate environment' is a subject (as is French), with English as medium of instruction	Arabic added to subject languages in P4–P6
Section 5.24: As a core subject in JSS, 'the language of environment shall be taught as L1 where it has orthography and literature. Where it does not have, it shall be taught with emphasis on oracy as L2'. French is also a core subject; Arabic is an elective	Section 2.23: Junior secondary education curriculum subject list includes 'one Nigerian language'. French and Arabic ('optional') also included
Section 5.25: Senior secondary school non-vocational elective includes 'any Nigerian Language that has orthography and literature, etc.' French and Arabic are also elective courses	Section 3.38: Senior secondary education curriculum includes an optional subject of 'any Nigerian language that has curriculum'. French and Arabic are also elective courses

Adapted from Pinnock (2009)

Nigeria's National Policy on Education (NPE) was first adopted in 1977, with revisions made in 1981, 1998, 2004, and 2007. The most recent version was published in 2013. The language provisions in the NPE are integrated throughout the document, rather than being concentrated in a single section. Several changes regarding language use in educational settings distinguish the 2014 version from the 2004 version. Three significant changes are particularly noteworthy: (1) the removal of Section 1.10, titled "The Importance of Language," from Section 1, which deals with the Philosophy and Goals of Education in Nigeria; (2) the elimination of specific requirements for learning Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba; and (3) the restriction of instruction in the Language of the Immediate Environment (LIE) to monolingual communities.

### **Challenges Concerning Policy Provisions on Language of Instruction:**

The current national policy on education often enforces a strict language policy that may not fully accommodate the diverse linguistic needs of students in different regions. A uniform approach to language instruction may fail to effectively address the specific language requirements of local communities.

The curriculum may not be sufficiently adapted to reflect the linguistic realities of various communities. This disconnects between the language of instruction and students' native languages can make learning more difficult.

The push for a standardized curriculum at the national level can result in the prioritization of certain languages (e.g., English) over others, potentially marginalizing indigenous languages.

## **Challenges Concerning Language Curriculum Implementation**

Despite policy directives encouraging the use of language of immediate environment in early education, the actual incorporation of these languages in classroom instruction and materials often falls short. Teachers may lack the necessary training or resources to teach in indigenous languages effectively, and curricula may not adequately support these languages.

The transition from local languages to English or French as the medium of instruction in later grades can be sudden, causing challenges for students who may not yet have sufficient proficiency in these languages. This can lead to academic struggles and disengagement.

There is often an implicit hierarchy in the curriculum that places international languages, such as English and French, above indigenous languages, which can undermine students' cultural identities and devalue learning in their native languages.

### **Recommendations:**

#### **Concerning Policy Provisions on Language of Instruction:**

The policy should establish a more adaptable language policy that allows for regional modifications based on the linguistic needs of pupils. This would enable local educational authorities to align language instruction to their specific contexts.

The policy should establish an avenue to engage in localized curriculum development to ensure indigenous languages are adequately represented and supported in the education system. This includes creating teaching materials, textbooks, and assessments in local languages.

While maintaining national standards, the policy should adopt a more balanced approach to standardization that values multilingualism and includes a broader spectrum of languages, ensuring no language is disproportionately favored over others within the national curriculum.

#### **Concerning Language Curriculum Implementation:**

Government should provide targeted teacher training and resources to equip language teachers with the necessary skills and tools to effectively teach in indigenous languages. This could involve language-specific professional development programs and the creation of indigenous language teaching materials.

Educational authority should provide a framework that could serve as a guide to implement a more gradual and supportive transition from indigenous languages to English from lower to upper basic education level. This could include bilingual education models where local languages could be used concurrently, easing the transition for pupils.

Educational authority should promote a more inclusive approach to language learning that values all languages equally within the curriculum. This could involve public

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awareness campaigns, curriculum reforms, and policy adjustments that elevate the status of indigenous languages in education.

By addressing these challenges with focused recommendations, it is possible to create a more inclusive and effective language policy that meets pupils' linguistic and educational needs within the curriculum.

### **Educational Implications**

Language is seen as having a crucial and distinctive role in capturing the full range of human thought and activity, with schools being constitutionally responsible for achieving national goals and fostering desirable development. This objective cannot be met without language, as it is essential for conveying and communicating curriculum content. An education-focused language policy could address these and other challenges affecting effective learning in Nigerian classrooms. Such a policy could offer actionable guidelines on suitable language choices and support the classroom environment. However, it is essential that any policy be grounded in sound pedagogy and supported by practical resources to significantly impact student learning outcomes. As one program implementer noted, improving reading scores requires clear policies for both L1 and L2, along with the necessary materials and training to support them.

Research on language attitudes and policy implementation shows that Nigerian languages are highly valued by their speakers, particularly in more rural and economically disadvantaged communities. However, the sociolinguistic contexts in which these languages are used can differ across ethnic groups and demographics. For instance, Ihemere (2006) reports a rapid shift from home languages to English (or more accurately, Nigerian Pidgin English) in the Port Harcourt area. In contrast, in northern communities where Hausa is the predominant language, English is often regarded with skepticism as a symbol of Western culture and Christianity. In these areas, Hausa is considered the essential language for education and communication. A 2008 survey conducted in various parts of Nigeria revealed that respondents preferred education in both English and their mother tongue rather than using just one language. Additionally, most respondents wanted to continue using their mother tongue beyond the first three years of primary education (Igboanusi, 2008).

In contrast, the country's elites predominantly favor English, as reflected in their educational choices for their children. However, Alebiosu (2016) points out a 'love-hate attitude' among this class towards English, noting that while they value their children's high proficiency in the language, they also express concerns about its dominance as a lingua franca. Nevertheless, English is widely perceived as the sole legitimate language for formal education across the nation. Ejieh (2004) observes that from the beginning of formal education in Nigeria, English has been strongly associated with educational success. Furthermore, English is almost universally seen as a key to economic advancement, and many parents are eager for their children to achieve fluency in the language (Anas and Liman, 2016). Proficiency in English is often viewed as the primary objective of formal education; as one scholar noted, if a child cannot speak English, it is assumed they are not learning, a belief evident in the curriculum across all educational levels (P1–P3, P4–P6, JSS, SSS), where English is frequently a compulsory subject.

## **Conclusion**

The significance of language in conveying knowledge, developing skills, shaping character, and nurturing growth cannot be overstated. Nigeria has chosen to educate children in their mother tongue, recognizing the crucial role language plays in education and aiming to keep children connected to their cultural roots. To ensure quality basic education and foster educational advancement, enduring peace, and national development, Nigeria must use a language that children can understand to effectively impart knowledge, wisdom, skills, creativity, and character. This underscores the critical importance of a child's first language, a principle that Nigeria has officially embraced and incorporated into its national education policy.



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