

APPRAISAL OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE AS EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS IN NIGERIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

TYOKASE MARY. E, OGUNSOLA OLUBIOSE ISOLA
& LAWAL OLUROTIMI. A

School of General Studies in Education,
Federal College of Education, Abeokuta, Ogun State.

tyokasemary@gmail.com +234(0)8161776173, ogunsolaisola10@gmail.com +234(0)8032195674
rotimilawal16@gmail.com +234(0)8069150368

Abstract:

The use of indigenous languages in education has been widely recognized as a crucial factor in enhancing learning outcomes, cognitive development, and cultural preservation. This study appraises indigenous language as an effective tool for educational achievement in Nigerian primary schools. It examines the benefits of mother tongue instruction, including improved literacy, better comprehension, and stronger critical thinking skills. The study also explores the challenges hindering the effective implementation of indigenous languages in schools, such as inadequate instructional materials, lack of trained teachers, policy inconsistencies, and parental preference for English-medium education. Through an empirical review of existing literature and comparative studies from other multilingual countries, this study highlights the importance of structured mother tongue-based education in improving academic performance. It recommends increased government investment, teacher training, curriculum development, and community sensitization to enhance the implementation of indigenous language education. By prioritizing indigenous languages alongside English proficiency, Nigeria can foster an inclusive and effective educational system that supports both academic excellence and cultural sustainability.

Keywords: Appraisal, Indigenous, Achievement, Mother tongue, Multilingual,

Introduction:

Language is a fundamental tool for communication, social interaction, and cognitive development, particularly in educational settings. Indigenous languages play a crucial role in shaping learners' understanding and assimilation of knowledge, especially in early childhood education. In Nigeria, where multilingualism is a defining characteristic, the use of indigenous languages as a medium of instruction in primary schools has been a subject of debate. Scholars argue that teaching in a child's mother tongue enhances comprehension, cognitive development, and academic performance (Bamgbose, 2000). However, despite the emphasis on mother-tongue education in Nigeria's National Policy on Education (FRN, 2013), implementation remains inconsistent, with English often being prioritized over indigenous languages.

Studies have shown that children who begin their education in their mother tongue tend to perform better in literacy and numeracy skills compared to those who start with a second language (Cummins, 2001). The use of indigenous languages in primary education has been linked to improved critical thinking skills, deeper cultural appreciation, and better classroom participation (Owolabi & Dada, 2012). However, challenges such as lack of standardized teaching materials, limited teacher training, and societal preference for English as a global language have hindered the full adoption of indigenous languages in primary education (Adebayo, 2017). This study appraises indigenous languages as an effective tool for educational achievement in Nigerian primary schools. It also examines the impact of mother-tongue instruction on learning outcomes, explores the challenges of implementation, and provides

recommendations for promoting indigenous language education in Nigeria.

Definition of Indigenous Language

Indigenous language refers to the native or mother tongue spoken by a particular group of people within a specific geographic location, often passed down from one generation to another (Fishman, 2001). These languages serve as a medium for cultural identity, traditional knowledge transmission, and community cohesion, particularly among ethnic groups in multilingual societies. According to UNESCO (2003), indigenous languages are those that originate and develop within a specific cultural group, forming an essential part of their heritage, worldview, and daily communication. They are crucial for early childhood education and cognitive development, as children learn better in their first language before transitioning to second-language literacy.

Bamgbose (2011) defines indigenous language as the primary language spoken by a native community, which has historical and cultural significance but may face challenges due to globalization and language shift. He emphasizes that the survival and promotion of indigenous languages depend on their integration into formal education and governance. Crystal (2014) describes indigenous languages as those spoken by native populations of a particular region before the influence of colonialism or external linguistic forces. He argues that these languages are endangered due to the dominance of global languages and the lack of institutional support, despite their importance in preserving indigenous knowledge systems.

Concept of Educational Achievement

Educational achievement refers to the measurable learning outcomes of students, often assessed through examinations, grades, and standardized tests. According to Slavin (2020), it encompasses academic performance in various subjects, reflecting students' mastery of curriculum content and their ability to apply knowledge effectively in different contexts. Trow (2018) defines educational achievement as the extent to which a student has attained their educational goals, which may include cognitive skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities. It is influenced by several factors such as teaching methods, learning environments, and students' socio-economic backgrounds.

According to Haralambos and Holborn (2019), educational achievement is not limited to academic success but also includes the development of intellectual, social, and emotional skills that contribute to lifelong learning. They argue that achievement is shaped by individual effort, institutional support, and cultural influences. Bernstein (2021) highlights educational achievement as a key indicator of a nation's human capital development, emphasizing its role in shaping future opportunities and economic growth. He asserts that literacy levels, graduation rates, and critical competencies serve as benchmarks for assessing the effectiveness of an educational system.

Indigenous Language in the Nigerian Educational System

Language plays a vital role in education, serving as the primary medium through which knowledge is transmitted. In Nigeria, a multilingual nation with over 500 indigenous languages (Eberendu, 2020), the role of language in education has been a subject of debate for decades. The National Policy on Education (NPE) emphasizes the use of indigenous languages in the early years of schooling, recognizing the importance of the mother tongue in cognitive and academic development (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). However, despite these policies, implementation remains inconsistent, raising concerns about the effectiveness of indigenous languages in primary education.

Historically, Nigeria's colonial legacy influenced its language policy, with English becoming the dominant language of instruction at all levels of education (Bamgbose, 2019). This shift marginalized indigenous languages, leading to a preference for English over mother tongues in both formal and informal settings. The 1977 National Policy on Education, later revised in 1981,

1998, and 2013, attempted to address this imbalance by stipulating that the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment should be used as the medium of instruction in the first three years of primary education (Fafunwa, 1990). However, due to poor policy implementation, limited teaching resources, and societal attitudes favouring English, indigenous languages continue to face challenges in Nigerian classrooms.

Empirical studies have shown that early education in the mother tongue enhances comprehension and learning outcomes (Olaoye & Oladipupo, 2021). Research by Adegbiya (2018) found that students taught in their native languages performed better in literacy and numeracy than those instructed exclusively in English. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of language in cognitive development. Learning in a familiar language allows children to grasp concepts more easily, engage actively in classroom discussions, and develop critical thinking skills.

Despite these benefits, several challenges hinder the effective use of indigenous languages in Nigerian schools. One major issue is the lack of standardized orthographies and instructional materials in many local languages (Ajibade, 2020). Additionally, there is a societal perception that English is the language of economic advancement, making parents and educators hesitant to support indigenous language instruction (Akinbode, 2022). Moreover, inadequate teacher training further weakens the implementation of indigenous language education, as many teachers are not proficient in the local languages they are expected to teach (Obafemi & Olatunji, 2017).

To address these challenges, scholars have suggested policy reinforcement, curriculum development, and increased teacher training programs to promote indigenous language education (Bamgbose, 2021). A well-implemented bilingual education system that integrates indigenous languages alongside English could enhance learning outcomes and preserve Nigeria's rich linguistic heritage.

Indigenous Language and Educational Achievement

Language plays a fundamental role in education, serving as the medium through which knowledge is transmitted and learning is facilitated. Indigenous languages, which are the first languages children acquire in their natural environment, have been recognized as essential tools for effective learning, especially at the foundational level of education. Research has shown that using indigenous languages as the language of instruction enhances cognitive development, improves literacy skills, and fosters deeper understanding among students (Bamgbose, 2000).

One of the key arguments in favour of indigenous language instruction is its impact on early literacy development. According to Cummins (2001), children learn more effectively when taught in a language they understand well, as it allows them to grasp complex concepts more easily. This is particularly important in primary education, where foundational literacy and numeracy skills are established. UNESCO (2010) also emphasizes that children who receive education in their mother tongue during the early years perform better academically than those who are taught in a second or foreign language.

Furthermore, the use of indigenous languages in education fosters cultural identity and self-esteem, which are crucial for academic motivation and achievement. Olayemi (2015) notes that when students learn in their native languages, they develop a sense of pride and belonging, which positively influences their engagement in learning activities. This is supported by Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which argues that language is a primary tool for cognitive development and social interaction, both of which are essential for learning.

However, despite the evident benefits, the implementation of indigenous language education in Nigeria faces significant challenges. According to Adegbite (2009), there is a lack of standardized orthographies and teaching materials in many indigenous languages, making it difficult for teachers to effectively instruct students. Additionally, societal attitudes towards indigenous languages tend to favour English, which is perceived as the language of upward mobility and global relevance (Bamgbose, 2011). These challenges have hindered the full integration of indigenous languages into Nigeria's educational system.

Empirical studies further reinforce the importance of indigenous languages in educational achievement. A study conducted by Oyetade (2017) on primary school pupils in south western// Nigeria found that students taught in Yoruba for the first three years of primary education performed significantly better in literacy and numeracy tests than those taught exclusively in English. Similarly, a comparative study by Trudell (2018) in several African countries revealed that mother tongue instruction led to higher retention rates and improved academic outcomes.

Challenges of Using Indigenous Language in Primary Schools

Despite the numerous advantages of indigenous language use in primary education, several challenges hinder its effective implementation. These challenges range from lack of standardization to attitudinal biases and policy constraints.

1. Lack of Standardization and Teaching Materials

One of the major barriers to using indigenous languages in primary schools is the lack of standardized orthographies, instructional materials, and textbooks (Bamgbose, 1991). Many indigenous languages in Nigeria lack comprehensive dictionaries, grammars, and educational resources, making it difficult for teachers to effectively instruct students. According to Akinnaso (2005), the development of indigenous languages for educational purposes requires extensive linguistic research, which has been largely neglected by policymakers. Without well-developed reading materials, students struggle to attain literacy in their mother tongue.

2. Shortage of Qualified Teachers

The shortage of adequately trained teachers proficient in indigenous languages poses a significant challenge to their use in primary education. Many teachers are more comfortable teaching in English and lack the necessary skills to instruct in local languages (Fafunwa, 1990). According to Oyetade (2002), most teacher training institutions in Nigeria do not emphasize indigenous language pedagogy, resulting in a scarcity of qualified instructors. This limitation affects the proper delivery of lessons and reduces the effectiveness of mother tongue-based instruction.

3. Negative Attitudes and Societal Perception

Many parents and policymakers view indigenous languages as inferior to English, which is seen as the language of upward mobility and global relevance (Adegbite, 2003). This perception has led to resistance in adopting indigenous languages for formal education. Bamgbose (2004) argues that many Nigerian parents prefer their children to be educated in English, believing it offers better career opportunities. Consequently, there is little enthusiasm for implementing mother tongue instruction, as both teachers and students prioritize English over indigenous languages.

4. Government Policy and Implementation Barriers

Although the Nigerian National Policy on Education (FRN, 2013) supports the use of mother tongue in early childhood education, its implementation has been inconsistent. Many schools do not adhere to the policy due to lack of enforcement mechanisms (Ajibola, 2011). Additionally, there is a contradiction in language policies, where English remains the dominant language of instruction despite government pronouncements in favour of indigenous languages (Bamgbose, 2011). This policy inconsistency hinders the practical adoption of indigenous languages in primary education.

5. Multilingual Nature of Nigeria

Nigeria is a highly multilingual country, with over 500 indigenous languages (Ethnologue, 2020). This linguistic diversity makes it challenging to determine which languages should be prioritized for educational purposes. According to Olagbaju and Akinsowon (2014), the

selection of a specific indigenous language for instruction can be politically sensitive, as different ethnic groups may feel marginalized. The lack of a clear policy on language prioritization complicates the adoption of indigenous languages in schools.

6. Limited Support from Examination Bodies and Higher Education

Most national and regional examination bodies, such as the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) and the National Examination Council (NECO), conduct assessments primarily in English (Adegbite & Akindele, 2009). As a result, students and teachers prioritize English over indigenous languages. Furthermore, higher education institutions predominantly use English, which discourages the sustained use of indigenous languages beyond primary school. This lack of continuity weakens the long-term impact of mother tongue education.

Appraisal of Indigenous Language as an Effective Tool for Educational Achievement in Nigerian Primary Schools

The use of indigenous languages in primary education has been widely debated among scholars, educators, and policymakers, particularly in multilingual societies like Nigeria. The National Policy on Education (FRN, 2013) recognizes the importance of mother tongue instruction in early childhood education, emphasizing its role in promoting effective learning and cultural preservation. Despite this policy, the actual implementation of indigenous language education remains inconsistent, as English continues to dominate as the primary language of instruction in most Nigerian schools. This paper appraises the role of indigenous languages as a critical tool for educational achievement in Nigerian primary schools, examining both its benefits and the challenges hindering its adoption.

Several studies have established a strong correlation between mother tongue instruction and improved academic performance among primary school learners (Bamgbose, 2004; Akinaso, 2005). According to Fafunwa et al. (1989), students who receive education in their indigenous language in the early years tend to have a better grasp of concepts, as they learn in a language they understand best. This understanding fosters literacy development and enhances cognitive abilities, allowing students to transition smoothly to other languages, including English. Furthermore, Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism emphasizes the role of language in cognitive development. Learning in a familiar language enables children to engage actively in the learning process, construct knowledge effectively, and participate in classroom discussions without linguistic barriers. Research by Adegbite and Akindele (2009) also suggests that mother tongue instruction enhances problem-solving skills, as students can relate classroom knowledge to real-life situations in their immediate environment.

Despite its potential benefits, the implementation of indigenous languages in primary schools faces several challenges. One major issue is the lack of instructional materials and resources in indigenous languages (Ajibola, 2011). Unlike English, which has well-developed textbooks and teaching aids, many Nigerian languages lack standardized written materials for various subjects, making effective instruction difficult. Additionally, inadequate teacher training poses a significant barrier. Many teachers in Nigeria are not proficient in the indigenous languages spoken in their school environments, making it challenging to deliver lessons effectively (Oyetade, 2012). Without proper training in bilingual or multilingual instruction, educators struggle to integrate indigenous languages into the teaching process.

Another major obstacle is the societal preference for English over indigenous languages. Many parents and guardians believe that proficiency in English is essential for securing better employment opportunities and achieving social mobility (Bamgbose, 2004). As a result, they discourage schools from adopting indigenous language instruction, fearing that it may hinder their children's future prospects. This negative perception further weakens the implementation of language policies that promote mother tongue education. Moreover, policy inconsistencies and lack of government commitment to indigenous language education have contributed to its limited success. While Nigeria's education policy supports the use of indigenous languages in

early education, enforcement mechanisms remain weak. The absence of clear implementation strategies, funding, and monitoring structures has led to the continued dominance of English as the primary language of instruction in most schools (Trudell, 2016).

Comparative studies provide valuable insights into how other multilingual societies have successfully integrated indigenous languages into their education systems. Ethiopia, for instance, has implemented a mother tongue-based education policy that allows children to receive instruction in their native languages throughout primary school before transitioning to English at the secondary level (Heugh, 2011). This approach has led to improved literacy rates and higher academic performance compared to countries where early English instruction is prioritized. Similarly, South Africa has adopted a bilingual education model that encourages students to develop literacy in both their mother tongue and English simultaneously. Research by Alexander (2005) suggests that this model enhances comprehension and language acquisition, as students can draw from their linguistic strengths while gradually developing proficiency in a second language.

Empirical Review of Related Studies

Empirical studies have explored the impact of indigenous language use in education, particularly in primary schools. Several researchers have examined the role of indigenous language in literacy development, cognitive growth, and overall academic performance, while others have analysed the challenges limiting its effective implementation in Nigeria and other multilingual societies.

Several studies have highlighted the positive relationship between the use of indigenous languages in education and students' academic performance. Fafunwa et al. (2019) conducted a longitudinal study on the Ife Primary Education Research Project, which introduced Yoruba as the language of instruction in primary schools. The study found that students taught in their mother tongue performed better in literacy, numeracy, and science than their counterparts educated in English. The findings suggest that indigenous language instruction enhances comprehension and cognitive development. Similarly, Bamgbose (2014) examined the impact of mother tongue education in selected African countries, including Nigeria, and found that early education in indigenous languages facilitates better conceptual understanding. The study concluded that when students grasp concepts in their mother tongue, they can transfer this knowledge to other languages, including English.

Research by Akinnaso (2015) explored the role of indigenous language in cognitive and linguistic development. The study revealed that students who receive instruction in their mother tongue during the early years of schooling develop stronger reading and writing skills compared to those who are immediately introduced to English. According to the study, indigenous language instruction helps students acquire critical thinking skills and strengthens their ability to learn additional languages later in life. In a related study, Adegbite and Akindele (2009) examined the bilingual education model in Nigeria and found that students who were first taught in their indigenous language before transitioning to English had better comprehension skills than those educated solely in English. The study emphasized the importance of gradual transition, as abrupt introduction to English often leads to learning difficulties.

Despite the benefits, empirical studies have also documented various challenges hindering the use of indigenous languages in primary schools. Ajibola (2011) investigated the constraints affecting mother tongue instruction in Nigerian primary schools. The study identified inadequate instructional materials, lack of teacher training, and policy inconsistencies as major barriers. The findings showed that many schools failed to implement the National Policy on Education's provision for mother tongue instruction due to logistical and attitudinal challenges. Another study by Oyetade (2012) examined parental attitudes towards indigenous language education. The research found that a significant percentage of Nigerian parents prefer English-medium instruction for their children, believing it enhances future employment opportunities. This preference discourages the adoption of indigenous language policies in schools, as parents often

pressure school administrators to prioritize English.

Comparative studies have provided insights into how indigenous language education is implemented in other multilingual societies. For example, a study by Heugh (2011) analysed language policies in Ethiopia, South Africa, and Nigeria. The research found that Ethiopia's mother tongue-based education model resulted in higher literacy rates compared to Nigeria's English-dominated system. The study suggested that Nigeria could benefit from adopting a more structured approach to mother tongue education, similar to Ethiopia's model. In another study, Trudell (2016) reviewed multilingual education in several African countries and found that nations with strong indigenous language policies tend to have better educational outcomes at the primary level. The study recommended that Nigeria invest more in developing indigenous language resources and training teachers to improve the effectiveness of mother tongue instruction.

Beyond academic achievement, empirical studies have shown that indigenous language instruction contributes to cultural preservation. A study by Olagbaju and Akinsowon (2014) examined the role of indigenous language education in sustaining cultural heritage. The research found out that students who learnt in their native language had stronger connection to their cultural identity and demonstrated greater respect for their traditions. The study emphasized the need for educational policies that promoted bilingualism, ensuring that indigenous languages remain relevant in modern society.

Conclusion

The appraisal of indigenous language as an effective tool for educational achievement in Nigerian primary schools highlights its significant role in enhancing learning outcomes, cognitive development, and cultural preservation. Research has shown that when children are taught in their mother tongue, they grasp concepts more effectively, leading to improved academic performance and literacy skills. Additionally, indigenous language education fosters critical thinking and a strong cultural identity among learners. However, despite its benefits, challenges such as inadequate instructional materials, insufficient teacher training, policy inconsistencies, and parental preference for English-medium instruction continue to hinder its full implementation. To maximize the potential of indigenous languages in primary education, there is a need for well-structured policies, increased government investment in multilingual education, and active community involvement. By prioritizing indigenous language instruction alongside English proficiency, Nigeria can create a more inclusive and effective educational system that supports both academic excellence and cultural sustainability.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that;

1. The Government should implement a well-structured language policy that promotes the use of indigenous languages as a medium of instruction in primary schools while ensuring a smooth transition to English at higher levels.
2. Educational institutions should develop and distribute adequate instructional materials in indigenous languages to support effective teaching and learning.
3. Teachers should receive proper training in multilingual education to equip them with the necessary skills for teaching in indigenous languages.
4. Parents and communities should be sensitized on the benefits of indigenous language education to encourage positive attitudes and support for its implementation.
5. Curriculum developers should integrate indigenous languages into the national curriculum to enhance literacy development and cultural preservation.
6. The government should allocate sufficient funds to support research, teacher training, and the production of indigenous language educational resources.
7. Schools should adopt a bilingual approach where both indigenous languages and English are used strategically to improve learning outcomes.

8. Policymakers should collaborate with linguists and educators to develop sustainable frameworks for implementing indigenous language education across all regions of Nigeria.

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