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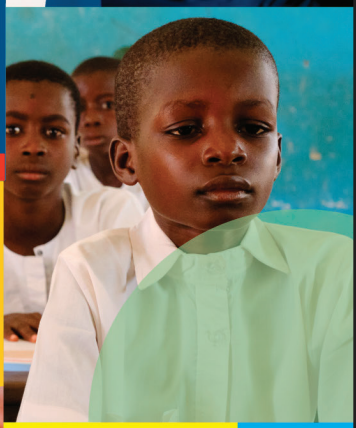
POLICY NOTE

LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION IN NIGERIA



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Language in Education in Nigeria

Language is central to effective learning, especially in a formal environment. Implementation of the formal curriculum depends on the learner's effective use of four key language skills in the language of the classroom. These language skills include reading, writing, speaking and listening. This central feature of formal learning is what gives such importance to language choices. The ways in which languages are chosen, used and supported in classrooms largely determine the degree of effective learning in those classrooms.

This report highlights findings from Phase II field research, part of a two-phase study on the role of language in education in Nigeria. By investigating language practices in primary-grade classrooms, research indicates that language choices made by teachers and education authorities have consequences on pupil learning outcomes. The research was part of the Girls' Education Project Phase 3 (GEP3) implemented in six northern states between 2012 and 2022. The study was carried out by Dr Barbara Trudell and commissioned by UNICEF on behalf of the Federal and State Ministries of Education with the generous financial support of, and partnership with, the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

This report draws on field research conducted in 2021 in primary-grade classrooms of Bauchi, Benue, Imo, Kano, Osun, Rivers, Sokoto and Taraba States. Observation, interview and assessment data provide a response to the research questions that shape Phase II of the language study. Data have been contextualized and drawn out of current literature related to the language of instruction and language of transition. The research questions focus on three particular language practices and the ways in which they play out in Nigerian classrooms:

- The use of First Language (L1) as language of instruction;
- The transition from L1 as language of instruction to Second Language (L2) as well as the timing of the transition;
- The use of the L2 as language of instruction

These three practices and their impact on pupil learning give shape to this investigation and report.

Summary Findings

Language of instruction: Policy versus practice

The language provisions of the current Nigerian National Policy on Education prescribe use of the language of the immediate environment (LIE) as medium of instruction through Primary 3 (P3), with transition to English as medium of instruction in P4. However, classroom practice in the primary schools is often very different: teachers regularly and frequently code-switch between the LIE and English as often as 40 times in a 40-minute class. Code-switching is an informal, impromptu sociolinguistic practice which can occur between speakers in a multilingual environment. However, Nigerian educators and linguists regarded its use in the primary classroom as blocking good L2 learning and impeding success in L2-medium examinations.

Classroom teachers participating in the study defended the practice of code-switching on the grounds that it is the only way that their primary school children are able to learn at all. The findings do not support this perspective, and data indicate that the performance of P1, P3 and P4 pupils actually improved as the teacher increasingly used the LIE in classroom teaching (see Table 1).

Early-exit language transition versus early-grade reading

The centrality of literacy skills in education has fuelled substantial attention to L1-medium early-grade reading (EGR) programming in Nigeria. EGR programmes are typically implemented as intervention initiatives in the early primary grades, often in the "mother tongue" subject on the curriculum. While an L1-medium EGR focus does help to provide primary school children with important skills in the language they understand, the approach is

Table 1. Language of instruction and pupil performance in the study areas

Language in which assignment was given	Percentage of teachers satisfied with pupil performance
LIE	71.1 – 83.6
English	20.0 - 66.1
LIE and English	60.8 - 75.5

Table 2. Pupils' proficiency in literacy and numeracy in LIE and English: Study area versus Rivers State (OBEC) pupils' average

Assessed as proficient in literacy and numeracy	Average percentage of pupils, 8 states	Percentage of OBEC pupils (Rivers State)
LIE: P3	66.7	85.9
LIE: P4	65.4	84.9
English: P3	45.7	64.3
English: P4	46.0	66.1

less effective than using the L1 across the curriculum for improving educational outcomes in P1-P3. When the L1 is used only to build reading skills and not to teach subject content, pupil learning outcomes overall are not strong (see Table 2).

However, Nigerian teachers agreed that it is important to add reading as a subject in the LIE curriculum for early primary grades to ensure children's learning progress.

Early-exit versus late-exit language transition

As the National Policy on Education (NPE) states, early-exit language transition is the expected language model for the primary schools. However, the eight-state study of primary-grade classrooms included one pilot late-exit transition programme, the Obolo Bilingual Education Centre (OBEC) in Rivers State. The programme has been in operation since 2014, and receives substantial support from the staff and Obolo community. The assessment carried out as part of this study indicated that the literacy and numeracy performance of P3 and P4 pupils in the late-exit Obolo-language programme was 30 per cent higher than the average pupil performance in the LIE, and also 40 per cent higher than the average pupil performance in English.

Recommendations

To enhance learning outcomes related to language of instruction at the primary school level, the following recommendations are offered in the report.

1. Strengthen and clarify national policy on language and education:

- Ensure that national education policy addresses the central role of L1 in learning at the primary school level, as well as the concerns of parents for their children's adequate mastery of English (see Tables 3 and 4).
- Establish a policy stance on how "languages of the immediate environment/community" are chosen and supported in multilingual classrooms.
- Ensure the establishment of a national education policy that supports the crucial role of reading instruction in Nigerian languages for effective learning outcomes.

2. Build the means for implementing the current language provision of the NPE:

- Provide teaching and learning materials in the LIE for all subjects, throughout P1-P3.
- Strengthen curriculum and syllabi for reading

instruction in the LIE in P1-P3, teaching of the LIE as a subject in P4-P6, and English language learning as a subject from P1-P6.

- Establish and strengthen standards for primary-grade teachers in oral and written proficiency, both in the English language and the LIE.
- Build teacher capacity and accountability to use the LIE as the medium of instruction for all subjects, including reading and writing, from P1-P3.

3. *Support innovation:*

- Support the development of textbooks and teacher training for language supportive pedagogy (using the LIE to support English-medium content learning in P4-P6).
- Facilitate a discussion with policy makers and community representatives, on how to negotiate the number of LIE that can realistically be supported in local primary education.
- Develop a school language mapping protocol that can be used to determine the languages most viable for use as LIE in a given region or state.
- Give attention to modifying the 2013 NPE, to clarify the Nigerian language choices available in early primary grades.

Table 3. Language of instruction (LoI) models in primary grades

Model	Language of instruction	Advantages	Disadvantages	Teacher opinion in the study
Immersion /submersion	L2 only No support for the L1	Requires no additional teaching resources for L1 pupils	L1 speakers are pedagogically disadvantaged	Not available
Early-exit language transition	L1 → L2 at P3 or P4	Common policy choice in Africa	Weak long-term learning outcomes Often inadequately implemented	Varied by state
Late-exit language transition	L1 → L2 at P6 or the end of upper primary	Strong learning outcomes in primary grades	Requires substantial policy/ implementation support	Those in OBEC (Rivers States) endorsed it
Maintenance	L1 throughout primary grades L2 taught as a subject throughout	Strong learning outcomes in primary grades	Requires substantial policy/ implementation support	Not available
Dual language-medium	L1 and L2 L1 builds a foundation for later L2			Generally positive

Table 4. Parents' perspectives on using the LIE as language of instruction

Perceived benefits	Perceived costs
"It is the language of society, so the pupils understand it in the classroom."	"The financial cost of buying all the L1 books would be too high."
"It allows the pupil to avoid a delay in learning."	"A child who learns in the L1 then has an accent when learning English."
"It is good for national development."	"It is hard for children of households where the LIE is not spoken."
"It has been fruitful in other countries."	"Parents who teach their child English at home will want an English-language school."

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