

# Indigenous Language Education and Sustainable Development in South-East Nigeria

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## Abstract

This study examined the role of indigenous language education in promoting sustainable development in South-East Nigeria. It investigated how the use of indigenous languages as media of instruction influences knowledge acquisition, cultural preservation, and national development in a multilingual society. Specifically, the study explored the availability of indigenous language curricula, the codification of scientific and technological terminology, language policy implementation, and the relationship between language, culture, and development. A descriptive survey design was adopted, and data were collected from 250 lecturers and students drawn from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Alvan Ikoku University of Education, Owerri, and Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, using stratified sampling and a structured questionnaire. Data were analysed using simple percentages. The findings revealed that indigenous language education remains inadequately integrated into the educational system due to weak policy implementation, limited curriculum development, and poor codification of scientific and technological terms. The study further found that the continued dominance of English as the language of instruction poses challenges to effective learning and the preservation of indigenous languages and culture. The study concludes that strengthening indigenous language education through effective policy implementation, curriculum reform, and the development of scientific vocabulary will enhance educational quality, cultural identity, and sustainable national development. It recommends greater institutional and governmental support for indigenous language education as a complementary medium of instruction alongside English.

**Keywords:** Indigenous language education, language policy, mother-tongue instruction, sustainable development, South-East Nigeria, national development.

## Introduction

Language plays a fundamental role in education, knowledge acquisition, cultural preservation, and national development. Across the world, countries that have achieved significant scientific and technological

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advancement have largely relied on their indigenous languages as vehicles for education, innovation, and governance (National Open University of Nigeria [NOUN], 2017). In multilingual societies such as Nigeria, however, the dominance of English as the principal language of instruction has continued to generate debate regarding its implications for educational quality, cognitive development, and sustainable national development (Awolaja and Awolaja, 2012). Although English serves as Nigeria's official language and facilitates communication across diverse ethnic groups, its predominance in formal education often limits learners' ability to fully comprehend concepts during the early stages of learning, thereby affecting educational outcomes and human capital development.

Education is widely recognized as a catalyst for socio-economic transformation and national progress. Human capital development depends not only on access to education but also on the effectiveness of the language through which knowledge is transmitted (Agbede and Bulus, 2024; Nneke, 2019). Development extends beyond economic growth to encompass improvements in human well-being, social inclusion, political participation, and cultural advancement (Menegbe and Omachonu, 2008; NOUN, 2002). Since language mediates communication, knowledge construction, and cultural transmission, it occupies a central position in achieving these developmental goals. Consequently, ineffective language policies may hinder educational attainment and reduce a nation's capacity for scientific and technological innovation.

Nigeria is home to over 500 indigenous languages, making it one of the most linguistically diverse countries in Africa (Adekunle, 2019). Despite this rich linguistic heritage, indigenous languages have received limited institutional support within the educational system, where English remains the dominant medium of instruction (Olaoye, 2007; Ugwu, 2021). Although the National Policy on Education recommends the use of the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community during the early years of schooling, implementation has remained inconsistent (Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN], 2004). This inconsistency has contributed to declining proficiency in indigenous languages, weakened cultural identity, and limited the educational benefits associated with mother-tongue instruction.

A growing body of research demonstrates that learners achieve better literacy, numeracy, conceptual understanding, and classroom participation when taught in languages they understand well (UNESCO, 2016). Mother-tongue-based education promotes meaningful learning by enabling children to connect new knowledge with their cultural and linguistic experiences. Indigenous languages also facilitate the preservation of traditional knowledge, strengthen cultural identity, and promote social cohesion (Adekunle, 2019; Ogunmodimu, 2015). Furthermore, countries that have successfully integrated indigenous languages into education have demonstrated that scientific and technological advancement is not dependent on foreign languages but on effective knowledge transmission within culturally relevant linguistic contexts.

Despite these documented benefits, language policy in Nigeria continues to experience implementation challenges and policy reversals. Recent developments, including the discontinuation of the proposed mother-tongue instruction policy in early childhood education, have renewed concerns regarding the future of indigenous language education and its implications for national development (Abubakar, 2025; National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2016). Such policy inconsistencies, coupled with the increasing preference for

English in private and public schools, threaten the vitality of indigenous languages and undermine efforts to preserve Nigeria's linguistic and cultural heritage.

Against this background, this study examines the role of indigenous language education as a catalyst for national development, with particular emphasis on South-East Nigeria. The study explores how the promotion and effective implementation of indigenous language education can enhance educational quality, human capital development, cultural preservation, and socio-economic advancement. It also seeks to provide evidence that can inform language policy and educational planning aimed at strengthening the role of indigenous languages in achieving sustainable national development.

### Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- i. How does language education influence development of the Third World countries?
- ii. What strategies within educational frameworks can effectively sustain indigenous language education?
- iii. What effect does foreign language source of instruction exert on science and technology learning outcome?

### Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis (Linguistic Relativity Theory), developed by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. The theory posits that language influences thought, perception, and the interpretation of reality. Sapir (1929) argued that individuals understand the world through the linguistic patterns of their communities, while Whorf (1956) maintained that people interpret nature according to the structures of their native languages. Thus, language is not merely a communication tool but also a carrier of culture, identity, and knowledge.

The theory supports the use of indigenous languages in education because learners acquire knowledge more effectively through their mother tongue, which facilitates concept formation, critical thinking, and cultural identity. This view is complemented by Critical Pedagogy, which emphasizes that meaningful learning occurs when education reflects learners' linguistic and cultural experiences (Freire, 1970). Similarly, sociolinguistic theory recognizes indigenous languages as essential for preserving cultural heritage, promoting social cohesion, and sustaining community development (Fishman, 1991).

Collectively, these theories provide the foundation for this study by explaining how indigenous language education can improve learning outcomes, preserve cultural identity, and contribute to sustainable national development.

## Methodology

The design adopted for this study is the qualitative descriptive design. This design is guided by the fact that it is systemic method of collecting and analyzing data collected from a large sample of population through the use of structured questionnaire and observation. The population of the study is the sample of lecturers and students drawn from the three universities sampled in the South-East; the university of Nigeria, Nsukka, Alvan Ikoku University of Education, Owerri, and Nnamdi Azikwe University, Awka in Anmbra State. The Population of the study comprise of 100 lectures and 150 students from Igbo/ linguistic departments in the above listed institutions in the South-Eastern Nigeria. This choice of the universities is as a result of the fact that the university is the apex of policy and curriculum formation and implementation. The research instrument deemed appropriate for the collection of data is a self-designed structured questionnaire. The questions will border on the codification and development of indigenous language in the South-East. In all, 250 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to respondents in the 3 selected universities and effort was been put to collect all as completed. The respondents' verdict was established by counting the number of people who considered the item strongly agreed or strongly disagreed and those who considered it agreed or disagreed. For easy reference, these figures were converted to simple percentage.

## Results and Discussion

**Table 1.** Respondents' Perceptions of Indigenous Language Education and National Development.

| ITEMS                                                                                                     | SA  | %   | SD  | %    | A   | %    | D  | %    | Total |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|------|----|------|-------|
| Methods of teaching Nigerian languages has become a compulsory course of study in institutions in Nigeria | --  | --  | 120 | 48   | 72  | 28.8 | 58 | 23.2 | 100   |
| Researches on codification of scientific and technological terms has been on in Nigerian institutions     | 50  | 20  | 99  | 39.6 | 68  | 27.2 | 33 | 13.2 | 100   |
| Teachers in the South-East always code-switch to elaborate teachings                                      | 18  | 7.2 | 68  | 27.2 | 120 | 48   | 44 | 17.6 | 100   |
| Teachers in my institution only use English language in their teaching                                    | 100 | 40  | 60  | 24   | 40  | 16   | 50 | 20   | 100   |

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|                                                                                         |     |      |    |      |     |      |    |      |     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|------|----|------|-----|------|----|------|-----|
| Thought and idea formations are always dominated by the language of instruction         | 150 | 60   | 20 | 8    | 55  | 22   | 25 | 10   | 100 |
| English language contradicts the culture of indigenous language speakers                | 77  | 30.8 | 76 | 30.4 | 50  | 20   | 47 | 18.8 | 100 |
| Discussions in the local languages are always code-mixed with English words and phrases | 102 | 40.8 | -- | --   | 136 | 54.4 | 12 | 4.8  | 100 |
| The contradiction between language of instruction and culture brings underdevelopment   | 99  | 39.6 | 10 | 4    | 134 | 53,6 | 7  | 2.8  | 100 |
| The interaction of indigenous languages ` and culture brings development                | 126 | 50.4 | 24 | 9.6  | 87  | 34.8 | 13 | 5.2  | 100 |
| Third World countries always have medium transition problem                             | 103 | 41.2 | 11 | 4.4  | 125 | 50   | 11 | 4.4  | 100 |

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## Discussion of Results

The findings reveal that indigenous language education remains inadequately integrated into higher education institutions in South-East Nigeria. Most respondents indicated that courses on the methods of teaching Nigerian indigenous languages are not compulsory, suggesting that teacher preparation for indigenous language instruction is insufficient. This finding supports the position of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013), which advocates the use of the mother tongue in the early years of education, but whose implementation has remained inconsistent.

The study further found that research on the codification of scientific and technological terminology in indigenous languages is limited. This inadequacy constrains the capacity of indigenous languages to function effectively as media of instruction in science and technology. The finding corroborates Adekunle (1995), who argued that African languages must be systematically developed to support scientific inquiry, technological advancement, and national development.

Respondents also acknowledged the widespread use of code-switching and code-mixing by teachers and learners. While these practices facilitate classroom communication where proficiency in English is limited,

they also reflect the absence of adequate technical vocabulary in indigenous languages. This observation is consistent with sociolinguistic studies that identify code-switching as a communicative strategy in multilingual societies (Fishman, 1991).

Although respondents did not overwhelmingly agree that language of instruction solely determines thought and idea formation, a substantial majority agreed that reliance on foreign languages creates communication barriers and contributes to medium transition problems in developing countries. This finding aligns with the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, which emphasizes that language shapes cognition and influences how individuals understand and interpret their environment (Sapir, 1929; Whorf, 1956). It also supports UNESCO (2016) recommendation that learners achieve better educational outcomes when taught in their mother tongue.

Furthermore, respondents agreed that the disconnect between the language of instruction and indigenous culture contributes to underdevelopment, whereas the integration of indigenous languages with cultural practices promotes development. This finding reinforces Freire's (1970) Critical Pedagogy, which argues that meaningful education should be rooted in learners' linguistic and cultural realities. It also supports previous studies showing that indigenous language education strengthens cultural identity, improves learning outcomes, enhances social cohesion, and contributes to sustainable national development (Adekunle, 2019; Ogunmodimu, 2015).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that strengthening indigenous language education through effective policy implementation, curriculum reform, and the development of scientific and technological vocabulary is essential for improving educational quality, preserving cultural heritage, and fostering sustainable national development in Nigeria.

## Conclusion

This study examined the role of indigenous language education in promoting sustainable development in South-East Nigeria. The findings indicate that inadequate indigenous language curricula, limited codification of scientific and technological terminology, and the continued dominance of English as the language of instruction have constrained the effective use of indigenous languages in education. These challenges have weakened the contribution of indigenous languages to knowledge acquisition, cultural preservation, and national development.

The study concludes that strengthening indigenous language education does not require replacing English but rather complementing it through the systematic development of indigenous language curricula and scientific vocabulary. Such an approach would enhance learners' comprehension, preserve cultural identity, and improve educational outcomes. Therefore, effective implementation of language policies, increased investment in indigenous language research, and the integration of indigenous languages into the educational system are essential for fostering sustainable development and human capital advancement in Nigeria.

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