

# Bilingual and Multilingual Medium of Instruction Policy: A Panacea for Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment in Nigeria

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## **Abstract**

*This paper examines the potential of bilingual and multilingual medium of instruction (MOI) policy as a solution for creating an inclusive learning environment in Nigeria. With over 250 ethnic languages and a complex linguistic diversity, Nigeria's education system faces significant challenges in providing equal access to quality education for all students. The dominant use of English as the sole MOI has resulted in a linguistic barrier, marginalizing mother-tongue speakers and perpetuating educational inequalities. This research argues that a well-implemented bilingual and multilingual MOI policy can address these challenges by promoting linguistic diversity and inclusivity, enhancing academic achievement and cognitive development, fostering cultural preservation and identity, bridging the gap between home and school languages, empowering marginalized communities through a critical analysis of existing literature, policy documents, and stakeholder interviews, this study explores the benefits, challenges, and implementation strategies of bilingual and multilingual MOI policy in Nigeria. The findings highlight the need for a contextualized and flexible approach, taking into account regional language dynamics, teacher training, and resource allocation. This research contributes to the ongoing debate on language policy and education in Nigeria, providing evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to create a more inclusive and effective education system. By embracing linguistic diversity, Nigeria can unlock the potential of its diverse student population and foster a more equitable and harmonious society.*

**Keywords:** Bilingual, Education, Inclusive, Multilingual, Policy

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## **I. Introduction**

Nigeria is a country known for its rich linguistic diversity, with over 500 languages spoken across its various regions. This linguistic diversity reflects the country's vast array of ethnic groups, each with its own unique language, culture, and traditions. The three major ethnic groups in Nigeria are the Hausa-Fulani in the north, the Yoruba in the southwest, and the Igbo in the southeast, but there are also numerous smaller ethnic groups spread throughout the country.

As much as it is an undeniable fact that Nigeria is a multilingual and multicultural society, the country's challenges over the years have been associated with the overemphasis of English as the medium of instruction in schools and an understandable abhorrence of the use of indigenous languages. Where the multilingual medium of instruction policies have been recommended and practiced, there is no consensus among language experts and educationists on the appropriate bilingual or multilingual method that will suit Nigeria's multicultural learning environment. Over the years, even though language experts have called for the introduction of bilingual and multilingual medium of instruction policy in schools, much emphasis has always been given to English both as a subject and as the medium of instruction throughout Nigeria's three-tiered education system. To qualify as a bilingual, one was supposed to have native-like control of two languages Dewaele (2013). Anyone who has minimal competence in one of the four skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) in a language that is not the first language, or anyone who controls two or more languages qualifies Dewaele, & Housen, (2002). Nigeria, with its rich tapestry of languages and cultures, faces unique challenges in its education system due to linguistic diversity.

All children are born with the capacity to acquire the language that they are exposed to. The children do not need to put a special effort to learn the structure and vocabulary of their mother tongue (Haznedar, 2021). Bilingualism has a long history as people have a need to communicate with people from different languages and culture. Bilingualism is having the competence to speak two languages. The reasons for bilingualism of individuals may differ. Some of them may have parents from different languages, some may be children of ethnic

minority or immigrants. In daily life it is possible to encounter more bilinguals than monolinguals. Bilingualism is not a new phenomenon, and it takes place in the media and news in different ways under different titles related to it Fakiroğlu and Abdullah (2023).

Bilingual education refers to an educational approach that involves the use of two languages in instruction and learning. Due to the multicultural nature of the region, people had to find a way to communicate with each other. Bilingualism is as old as human history, and it is closely concerned with individuals, groups, and countries. Bilingualism can be observed in different contexts such as family, school, or community. For some people, learning another language may be intentionally for keeping pace with the developments in the globalized world, for learning about another culture, for communication in trade or communicate with the immigrants. Beyond this intentional and conscious learning of a language, bilingualism can be unintentional Fakiroğlu and Abdullah (2023). Some bilingual children are born in multilingual families or immigrant families. Those children grow up by hearing two or more different languages simultaneously (Özşen et al., 2020). Children born in immigrant families face some difficulties in maintaining their parents or ancestors' language. The most important challenge for bilinguals is having fluency and proficiency in both family language and mainstream language. Fluent bilingualism is a richness for individuals. If bilinguals stop using one of the languages, they transform to monolingualism which is accepted as a loss. This loss is usually due to the fact that parents do not usually communicate with their children in their native languages as they fear their children's facing failure at school. Another reason for the loss of one of the languages may be due to the long term plan for returning to the native country. Another case for bilinguals is that they live in close districts with the speakers of their languages, and they maintain their native language with high vitality. However, third and fourth generations may not be so determined to maintain their native language and transfer it to new generations (Portes & Shauffler, 1994).

Grosjean (2010) pointed out that bilinguals are not necessarily equally fluent on all topics in both their languages, and this is because of the complementarity principle. The primary goal of bilingual education is to promote proficiency in two languages while simultaneously providing access to academic content and curriculum. Another means or mode of 'bilingualism' is code switching. This is not "just a haphazard mixing of two languages brought about by laziness or ignorance or some combination of these" Wardhaugh (1998). On the contrary, the person who code switches is a person who has a sophisticated knowledge of both codes and is also acutely aware of the norms of the community. These norms require that the participants make use of these languages in this way to show solidarity and familiarity. "The ability to mix codes in this way", as Wardhaugh (1998) puts it, "is now often a source of pride, e.g. the ability to use pocho or, caló, the names that many Spanish-speaking North Americans give to these varieties". Through code switching, bilingual speakers may also show ethnic membership (Olivares, 1975 in Pride, 1978). The code-switcher knows when to use one language or the other depending on the situation-that is, whether one wishes to show intimacy and personal feelings or authority. 'Code switchers', Sebba (1997) argues, "construct a potent and finely modulated personal blend of languages each time they speak, and do so almost always without breaking any of the grammatical rules of either language". In fact, code switching is regarded as a relevant aspect in both social communication and cognitive development (Mishra & Yadav, 2013; Simasikul; Kasanda & Smit, 2015).

In other words, to be able to switch, a person must know both languages very well. Code mixing is seen as a common mode of code switching. One of the main differences is that code mixing is connected not only with grammar but with "every level of lexical and syntactic structure such as words, phrases, clauses and sentences" as well (Sridhar, 1996 in McKay and Hornberger, 1996). According to the Oxford Companion to the English Language (1992), the term code mixing focuses on 'hybridation', and the term code switching highlights "movement from one language to another". Heavy code switching, which is performed by highly multilingual speakers, is generally the language norm for some multilingual speakers in some communities (Smakman, 2019). Written in the light of the ongoing controversies regarding the grammar usage of English, the paper attempts to stimulate a discourse aimed at searching, identifying, and proposing the suitable bilingual and multilingual method of medium of instruction for Nigeria's very complex learning environment. Specifically, the paper examined the multilingual abilities of Nigerian children and opposed the allegations that indigenous languages cannot be used in teaching some subjects in schools. The paper noted the simple method that can make English be given its pride of place as a second language throughout Nigeria.

The term multilingual means speaking or using several different languages, in a multilingual nation. "Multilingualism is a co-existence of many languages in one nation" For instance in Nigeria certain languages are characterized as major while others are tagged as minor. Similarly, some languages are characterized as national, or official while some are regarded as lingua franca or regional. Multilingual education refers to an educational approach that involves the use of multiple languages in instruction and learning, beyond just two languages. The primary goal of multilingual education is to promote proficiency in multiple languages while providing access to academic content and curriculum. multilingualism is a linguistic concept used to describe a situation in which an individual, a group or a nation uses more than two languages in communicating national or group needs" (Eka, 2000). The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language also defines multilingualism as "the ability of an individual or a community of speakers to use multiple languages". It adds that a person who can speak multiple

languages is referred to as a polyglot or a multilingual. A synopsis of these definitions indicates that multilingualism can be used to describe an individual speaker, or a group of speakers. It can also be applied to a whole country, for instance, Nigeria. Dewaele and Stavans (2014) argued that the categorization of people according to the number of languages they claim to know and use may be too imprecise.

Bilingualism or multilingualism is a phenomenon spread throughout the world. It is hard to think of monolingual speakers or 'monocultural' people in this globalised and 'mixed' world. 'Dynamic bilingualism' as discussed by García (2009) "refers to language practices that are multiple and ever adjusting to the multimodal terrain of the communicative act". To her, this concept of 'dynamic bilingualism' is closely connected with the notion of plurilingualism as defined by The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: the ability to "use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural action, where a person, viewed several languages and experience of several cultures" (Council of Europe, 2000 in Garcia 2009: 144). In a multilingual paradigm of language, "code-mixing serves important sociocultural and textual functions as an expression of certain types of complex personalities and communities". Furthermore, the use of code mixing "implies a more sophisticated linguistic competence than monolingual language use" because a code mixer is able to "integrate grammatical units from two different language systems into a more complex linguistic structure"

### **Features of bilingual education:**

Bilingualism is a personal richness for individuals' social, cognitive, and academic development. If the bilingualism of the child is not supported with sufficient input, the child will lose one of the languages even if they are exposed to the language in their early childhood, The children's language proficiency in each language depends on the exposure to the language from proficient speakers, the value of their heritage language in the society and encouragement to use the language (Hoff, 2018). These are the features of bilingual education

**Language Proficiency:** Bilingual education aims to develop students' proficiency in two languages: their native language (often referred to as the "home language" or "mother tongue") and a second language, typically the dominant language of instruction in the educational system (e.g., English in many countries).

**Balanced Instruction :** In bilingual education programs, instruction is delivered in both languages, with the goal of achieving a balance between the two. This means that students receive instruction in academic subjects (e.g., mathematics, science, social studies) in both languages, ensuring that they develop proficiency in both languages while also mastering the content.

**Cultural Awareness :** Bilingual education often incorporates cultural elements and perspectives from both language communities, promoting cultural awareness, appreciation, and respect among students. This helps students develop a positive sense of identity and belonging within their linguistic and cultural communities.

**Support for Language Development :** Bilingual education provides support for students to develop their language skills in both languages through structured language instruction, vocabulary development, reading and writing activities, and opportunities for oral communication.

**Transfer of Skills:** Bilingual education recognizes the interconnectedness of languages and aims to facilitate the transfer of linguistic and cognitive skills between languages. This means that skills acquired in one language can support learning in the other language, leading to overall cognitive development and academic success.

**Inclusive Approach :** Bilingual education is often seen as an inclusive approach to education that supports students from linguistically diverse backgrounds, including language minority students, English language learners (ELLs), and students who are proficient in both languages.

**Parent and Community Involvement :** Bilingual education programs often involve parents and community members in the educational process, recognizing the importance of family support and community engagement in promoting language development and academic achievement.

Bilingual education offers a holistic approach to language and academic development, promoting proficiency in two languages, cultural awareness, and academic success for all students, regardless of their linguistic background. By providing instruction in both languages, bilingual education prepares students to navigate a multicultural and multilingual world and to succeed in an increasingly globalized society.

There is a growing recognition of the need for a more inclusive approach through the adoption of bilingual and multilingual medium of instruction policies. This paper explores the potential of such policies as a panacea for creating an inclusive learning environment in Nigeria.

### **Features of Multilingual Education:**

**Language Diversity:** Multilingual education recognizes and celebrates linguistic diversity by incorporating multiple languages into the educational process. This may include the use of three or more languages in instruction, reflecting the linguistic diversity present within a given community or region.

**Flexibility:** Multilingual education programs are flexible and adaptable to the linguistic needs and preferences of students, allowing for the inclusion of various languages spoken by students and communities. This

flexibility ensures that all students have access to education in languages they understand and can engage with effectively.

**Cultural Enrichment:** Multilingual education enriches students' cultural experiences by exposing them to multiple languages, cultures, and perspectives. By incorporating cultural elements, traditions, and practices from different language communities, multilingual education promotes cultural awareness, appreciation, and respect among students.

**Language Maintenance and Revitalization:** Multilingual education supports language maintenance and revitalization efforts by providing opportunities for the preservation and promotion of indigenous languages and cultural heritage. By incorporating indigenous languages into education, multilingual education helps preserve linguistic diversity and prevent language loss.

**Language Integration:** Multilingual education aims to integrate languages into the curriculum and instructional materials in a meaningful and purposeful way. This may involve using multiple languages across different subjects and academic disciplines, ensuring that students develop proficiency in all languages while also mastering academic content.

**Cross-Linguistic Transfer:** Multilingual education recognizes the interconnectedness of languages and promotes the transfer of linguistic and cognitive skills between languages. This means that skills acquired in one language can support learning in other languages, leading to overall cognitive development and academic success.

**Community Engagement :** Multilingual education involves parents, families, and community members in the educational process, recognizing the importance of community support and involvement in promoting language development and academic achievement. By engaging with communities, multilingual education programs can better address the linguistic and cultural needs of students and families.

multilingual education offers a comprehensive approach to language and cultural development, promoting proficiency in multiple languages, cultural enrichment, and academic success for all students, while also supporting language maintenance and revitalization efforts within communities.

### **Bilingualism and Multilingualism Literacy**

One of the most important and confusing issue about bilinguals is teaching literacy in early childhood. There is a conflict on whether to teach how to read and write in the mother tongue or the mainstream language which they will encounter at school. Language and cognitive development of children is a crucial subject for pre-school period. Some bilinguals acquire literacy skills in their mother tongue and some directly acquire the mainstream language when they go to school without any pre-school mother tongue instruction. The bilinguals' exposure to literacy highly depends on the parents' level of education, their expectations for children's education, their proficiency in the languages and awareness about language teaching. Teaching literacy feeds children's lexical development, increases metalinguistic awareness and directly helps cognitive development (Bialystok, 2003)

### **Benefits of Bilingual and Multilingual Medium of Instruction**

The benefits of bilingual and multilingual medium of instruction policies in Nigeria has the potential to create a more inclusive learning environment, addressing the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of students. This approach aligns with the principles of inclusive education, which emphasize the importance of accommodating all learners, including those with disabilities and those from various linguistic backgrounds. The Nigerian National Policy on Education recognizes the need for inclusivity, aiming to foster peaceful coexistence among its diverse populace Orlunga, (2023). Research indicates that bilingual and multilingual classrooms can enhance the learning experiences of students with disabilities when teachers are adequately prepared to navigate the complexities of such environments, highlights the necessity for teachers to focus on the division of labor in bilingual classrooms to prevent exclusionary practices that may arise from rigid adherence to evaluation systems Martínez, (2019). This is echoed by, who emphasizes the importance of continuous professional development for teachers to effectively implement inclusive education practices (Oyetero, 2019). By equipping educators with the necessary skills and knowledge, the potential for creating an inclusive atmosphere in bilingual settings increases significantly. Furthermore, the benefits of bilingual and multilingual education extend beyond academic performance to social acceptance among students McGuire (2021). This finding suggests that bilingual education can serve as a bridge for social integration, which is crucial in a multicultural society like Nigeria.

In addition to social benefits, the pedagogical strategies employed in bilingual classrooms, such as translanguaging, play a critical role in enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes discusses how teachers can utilize translanguaging practices to facilitate communication and understanding among students from diverse linguistic backgrounds (Tyler, 2016). This approach not only validates students' home languages but also promotes a richer learning experience by allowing them to draw on their full linguistic repertoire (Set, 2023). The recognition of students' linguistic diversity as a resource rather than a barrier is essential for fostering an inclusive educational environment. Moreover, the positive impact of bilingualism on classroom participation and academic performance has been documented in various studies suggest that bilingual students often exhibit better

performance and participation compared to their monolingual peers Pormouzeh and Azar (2015). This finding underscores the importance of multilingual and bilingual education policies that support active engagement and learning among all students, particularly in a context where educational equity is a pressing concern. In conclusion, the adoption of bilingual and multilingual medium of instruction policies in Nigeria is not merely a pedagogical choice but a necessary step towards achieving an inclusive educational framework. By recognizing and harnessing the linguistic diversity of students, educators can create learning environments that are equitable and conducive to the success of all learners. The integration of inclusive practices, continuous professional development for teachers, and the promotion of social acceptance through bilingual education are vital components in realizing this vision.

### **Challenges and Implementation Strategies of Bilingual and Multilingual**

The implementation of bilingual and multilingual medium of instruction policies in Nigeria has emerged as a crucial strategy for fostering an inclusive learning environment. Given Nigeria's linguistic diversity, with over 500 indigenous languages spoken alongside English as the official language, the need for an educational framework that accommodates this multilingual reality is paramount ("Matching Contemporary Linguistic Realities in Multilingual Societies: An Analysis of Nigeria's Language Education Policy", 2021; Iwuchukwu, 2021; Ayeomoni, 2012). The National Policy on Education (NPE) emphasizes the importance of proficiency in both a mother tongue and a major Nigerian language, aiming to create a bilingual education system that reflects the country's cultural and linguistic landscape (Udoye, 2019; Achike (2022)). Despite the fact that the government through the National Policy on Education can be said to favour the use of two or more languages in the educational system, implementation of the multilingual provisions has been a serious issue. In an attempt to find out the different factors responsible for the poor implementation of these provisions, scholars have identified possible challenges which include; Multi-lingual challenge, Negative attitudes of students, Lack of curriculum materials, Ambiguities in the policy, Parental factors, Teacher quality. Having outlined the possible contemporary issues facing the implementation of complete use of indigenous languages as medium of instruction in schools, highlighting specific issues on the challenges of multilingual education and future of English language. This policy is not merely a formality; it is a necessary response to the challenges posed by a predominantly English-medium education system that often alienates students from their linguistic heritage (Olajide, 2023; Okunrinmeta, (2014)). Research indicates that bilingual education can significantly enhance cognitive and practical skills among students. For instance, a study on pre-service integrated science teachers demonstrated that bilingual instruction (in English and Yoruba) improved cognitive achievement and practical skills in ecology (Olajide, (2023)). This finding aligns with broader educational theories suggesting that when students learn in their native languages alongside a second language, they are more likely to achieve better academic outcomes (Marian et al., 2013). Furthermore, bilingual education fosters a sense of identity and belonging, which is essential for student motivation and engagement in a diverse society like Nigeria (Lasagabaster, 2017; Akinkuotu, 2022). The attitudes of Nigerian students towards their native languages and English reveal a complex interplay of cultural identity and educational practice. While English is often viewed as a language of prestige and opportunity, many students express positive attitudes towards their native languages, which they associate with cultural identity and community (Wappa, 2020). This duality underscores the necessity for educational policies that not only promote English proficiency but also validate and incorporate indigenous languages into the curriculum. Such an approach can mitigate the negative perceptions associated with native languages and enhance students' overall language competence (Adedigba, 2023). Moreover, the integration of indigenous languages into the educational framework can lead to improved understanding and retention of knowledge. Studies have shown that when instruction is delivered in a language that students are familiar with, their comprehension and engagement levels increase significantly (Adedigba, 2023). This is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where the majority of students are bilingual or multilingual, often acquiring their first language before learning English (Okunrinmeta, 2013). By leveraging this linguistic background, educators can create more effective teaching strategies that resonate with students' lived experiences and cultural contexts (Okunrinmeta, 2014). The role of teachers in implementing bilingual education is critical. Educators must be adequately trained to navigate the complexities of teaching in a multilingual environment. This includes understanding the linguistic dynamics at play and being equipped with the pedagogical skills necessary to teach effectively in both the official and indigenous languages.

Professional development programs that focus on bilingual education strategies can empower teachers to foster an inclusive classroom environment that respects and promotes linguistic diversity (Adedigba, 2023). In addition to enhancing academic performance, bilingual education can contribute to social cohesion and national integration. By recognizing and valuing the linguistic diversity within Nigeria, educational policies can promote mutual respect and understanding among different ethnic groups (Uwaezuoke, 2018). This is particularly important in a country where ethnic tensions can arise from linguistic and cultural differences. Bilingual education can serve as a bridge, fostering communication and collaboration among students from diverse backgrounds (Lasagabaster, 2017; Akinkuotu, 2022). Furthermore, the implementation of bilingual education policies can have far-reaching implications for national development. By equipping students with the skills necessary to navigate

both local and global contexts, Nigeria can enhance its human capital and competitiveness on the international stage ("Matching Contemporary Linguistic Realities in Multilingual Societies: An Analysis of Nigeria's Language Education Policy", 2021; Akinkuotu, 2022). Multilingual education not only prepares students for local job markets but also positions them to engage in global conversations, thereby fostering a sense of global citizenship (Olajide, 2023; Marian et al., 2013). The challenges of implementing bilingual education in Nigeria are multifaceted. Issues such as inadequate teaching resources, negative perceptions of indigenous languages, and a lack of trained educators can hinder the effectiveness of bilingual programs (Iwuchukwu, 2021; Okunrinmeta, 2014). To address these challenges, stakeholders must collaborate to develop comprehensive strategies that include curriculum reform, teacher training, and community engagement initiatives (Adedigba, 2023). By fostering a supportive environment for bilingual education, Nigeria can create a more inclusive educational landscape that benefits all learners. In conclusion, bilingual and multilingual medium of instruction policies represent a viable solution for creating an inclusive learning environment in Nigeria. By embracing the country's linguistic diversity and promoting the use of both indigenous languages and English, educational policies can enhance academic achievement, foster cultural identity, and contribute to national integration. The successful implementation of these policies requires a concerted effort from educators, policymakers, and communities to ensure that all students have access to quality education that reflects their linguistic and cultural realities. By examining the features, benefits, challenges, and implications of bilingual and multilingual instruction, this study aims to provide insights into how Nigeria can leverage its linguistic diversity to enhance educational outcomes and promote social cohesion.

## **II. Conclusion**

In conclusion, bilingual and multilingual education holds immense potential for transforming the educational landscape in Nigeria. By recognizing and embracing linguistic diversity, promoting cultural understanding, and fostering cognitive development, bilingual and multilingual education can empower students, enrich communities, and contribute to national development. Despite the challenges faced in implementation, the benefits of bilingual and multilingual education far outweigh the obstacles. Moving forward, concerted efforts are needed to advocate for policy reforms, invest in teacher training and curriculum development, engage communities, and conduct research to support the expansion and improvement of bilingual and multilingual education initiatives across Nigeria. By doing so, we can create a more inclusive, equitable, and culturally vibrant educational system that prepares students for success in a globalized world and strengthens the fabric of our society.

## **III. Recommendations**

The research made the following recommendations:

1. Advocate for the development and implementation of policies that support bilingual and multilingual education in Nigeria at the national, state, and local levels. This may involve engaging with policymakers, education authorities, and relevant stakeholders to raise awareness of the benefits of bilingual and multilingual education and to push for policy reforms.
2. Invest in teacher training and professional development programs to build the capacity of educators in bilingual and multilingual pedagogy. Provide training opportunities, resources, and support for teachers to effectively deliver instruction in multiple languages and to create inclusive learning environments.
3. Collaborate with curriculum developers, educators, and language experts to develop standardized curricula, instructional materials, and assessment tools that are suitable for bilingual and multilingual education contexts in Nigeria. Ensure that curricula are culturally relevant, linguistically diverse, and aligned with national educational standards.
4. Engage with local communities, parents, and caregivers to garner support for bilingual and multilingual education initiatives. Foster partnerships with community organizations, cultural institutions, and language advocates to promote the value of linguistic diversity and to encourage the use of indigenous languages in education.
5. Conduct research and evaluation studies to assess the effectiveness of bilingual and multilingual education programs in Nigeria. Gather evidence-based data on student outcomes, teacher practices, and program implementation to inform policy decisions, improve program quality, and advocate for continued investment in bilingual and multilingual education.
6. Launch public awareness campaigns to raise awareness of the importance of bilingual and multilingual education for individual students, communities, and society as a whole. Use various media channels, community events, and educational platforms to disseminate information, share success stories, and showcase the benefits of bilingual and multilingual education.

By employing these strategies and advocating for bilingual and multilingual education in Nigeria, you can help create a more inclusive, culturally responsive, and linguistically diverse educational system that benefits all students and contributes to the overall development and prosperity of the nation.

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