



Current Challenges and Prospects of Indigenous Language Education in Africa

¹Fatai Toyin KAREEM, Ph.D. & ²ABDULRAHMAN, Abdulwaheed Abiodun Ph.D.

¹(kareemfatai89@gmail.com,

²abdulrahman.abdulwaheed@kwasu.edu.ng)

¹Department of English and Linguistics, Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria

²Department of Arts and Science Education, Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria

Abstract

This article explores the current challenges and prospects of indigenous languages in African education, emphasising their importance in enhancing educational outcomes, preserving cultural heritage, and promoting sustainable development. The study notes that using indigenous languages as the medium of instruction significantly improves cognitive development and academic performance, particularly in early childhood education. Case studies from Ethiopia, South Africa, and Nigeria demonstrate the success of mother-tongue-education in fostering social cohesion and national unity. However, the implementation of indigenous language pedagogy faces challenges such as linguistic diversity, lack of resources, and the dominance of colonial languages. The article recommends comprehensive language policies, investment in teacher training, and leveraging technology to support indigenous language education. In particular, the findings underscore the need for African countries to recognise and integrate indigenous languages into their education systems as a means of achieving more inclusive and effective development outcomes.

Keywords: Cognitive development, Mother-tongue instruction, Sustainable development, Multilingual education, Language policy.

Introduction

Indigenous languages are more than just a means of communication; they are the bedrock of cultural identity, carrying the history, traditions, and values of communities across generations. In Africa, where the linguistic landscape is incredibly diverse, indigenous languages play a critical role in preserving cultural heritage and fostering a sense of



belonging among communities. However, despite their importance, these languages are often marginalised in formal education systems, where colonial languages such as English, French, and Portuguese dominate. This marginalisation not only threatens the survival of indigenous languages but also limits the potential for using them as tools for teaching and learning.

The integration of indigenous languages into education is crucial for achieving inclusive and sustainable development in Africa. When children are taught in their mother tongue, they are more likely to understand and retain information, perform better academically, and develop a stronger connection to their cultural roots (UNESCO, 2008). Furthermore, using indigenous languages in education helps to bridge the gap between home and school, making learning more relevant and meaningful to students. As Africa continues to strive for development that is both viable and sustainable, it is essential to recognise the instrumental role that indigenous languages can play in this process.

This article explores the role of indigenous language in education within the African context with highlights of successful case studies from across the continent. It examines the benefits of using indigenous languages in education, its contribution to the cognitive development of learners, the potential of these languages to lifelong learning, the challenges faced in its implementation in schools.

The Role of Indigenous Languages in African Education

Indigenous languages hold a unique position in African education, offering a culturally relevant and contextually appropriate means of instruction. For many African children, their first experience with formal education involves transitioning from their home language to a foreign language, often English or French, which can create significant barriers to learning. Research has shown that children learn best when they are taught in a language they understand, particularly in the early years of education (Bodoma, 2023). By using indigenous languages as the medium of instruction, educators can ensure that children grasp basic concepts more easily, which lays a stronger foundation for further learning.

The use of indigenous languages in education is also crucial for maintaining cultural continuity. Language is a key carrier of culture, and



when children are educated in their mother-tongue, they are more likely to develop a deep understanding of their cultural heritage. This connection to culture can foster a sense of pride and identity, which is particularly important in a globalised world where cultural homogenisation is a growing concern. Moreover, when indigenous languages are used in the classroom, they help to validate and elevate the status of these languages within society, encouraging their continued use in both formal and informal settings. This might be one of the reasons the United Nations launched the International Decade of Indigenous languages (IDIL2022-2032) with special focus on the promotion of indigenous languages globally.

In addition to cultural preservation, the use of indigenous languages in education has practical implications for improving educational outcomes. Studies have shown that children who receive instruction in their mother-tongues tend to perform better academically, particularly in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) where conceptual understanding is critical (UNESCO, 2016). This is because learning in a familiar language reduces cognitive load, allowing students to focus on the content rather than struggling to understand the language of instruction. As a result, students are more likely to succeed academically, which can have long-term benefits for their educational and career prospects.

Furthermore, indigenous language education can contribute to social cohesion and national unity. In multilingual societies, where multiple indigenous languages co-exist, using these languages in education can help to promote mutual respect and understanding among different linguistic groups. This approach can reduce tensions that may arise from linguistic and ethnic differences, fostering a more inclusive and harmonious society. For example, in South Africa, the promotion of indigenous languages in education has been a key component of the country's efforts to build a post-apartheid society that is inclusive of all its diverse cultural and linguistic communities (Alexander, 2010).

However, despite these benefits, the implementation of indigenous language pedagogy in Africa remains limited. Many education systems continue to prioritise colonial languages, often due to perceived economic advantages associated with proficiency in these languages.



This has led to a situation where indigenous languages are undervalued and underutilised in formal education, which not only limits their potential as tools for learning but also threatens their long-term survival. To address this issue, it is essential to develop and implement policies that support the use of indigenous languages in education and recognise their value as instruments for viable development.

Challenges in Implementing Indigenous Languages in Education

While the benefits of using indigenous languages in education are well-documented, the implementation of such practices faces significant challenges across Africa. These challenges are multifaceted, involving linguistic, socio-economic, political, and institutional factors that collectively hinder the widespread adoption of indigenous-language-medium education.

One of the primary challenges is the linguistic diversity within African countries. In nations like Nigeria, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, there are hundreds of indigenous languages, each with its own distinct dialects and variations (Simons & Fennig, 2017). This linguistic diversity presents a significant obstacle to the implementation of indigenous language education, as it requires the development of teaching resources, teacher training programmes, and standardised curricula in multiple languages. Additionally, the selection of which languages to prioritise can be politically sensitive, as it may lead to perceptions of favoritism or marginalisation among different ethnic groups.

Another major challenge is the lack of resources and infrastructure to support indigenous- language-medium education. Many African countries face significant economic constraints, which limit their ability to invest in the necessary resources for developing indigenous language education programs. Such resources are both human and non-human. While the non-human resources could be in the form of relevant textbooks, dictionaries, and other teaching materials in indigenous languages, the teachers who are users of the materials are very important. This is especially regarding their proficiencies in the indigenous languages (Peggy & Pole, 2015). In many cases, teachers themselves may not have received adequate training in indigenous languages, making it difficult for them to effectively teach in these



languages. Furthermore, schools in rural, underserved and marginalised areas, where indigenous languages are most commonly spoken, often lack the basic infrastructure needed to support effective teaching and learning in the indigenous languages.

The dominance of colonial languages in education systems also poses a significant challenge. In many African countries, colonial languages such as English and French are seen as the languages of prestige and economic opportunity. As a result, there is a positive attitude towards these languages, thereby, resulting in their usage in education, particularly at the basic and secondary levels which were hitherto supposed to be anchored on the indigenous languages (Olagbaju, 2020). This preference is often reinforced by government policies and the perceived advantages of being proficient in a global language, which can lead to better job prospects and access to higher education. Consequently, indigenous languages are often relegated to the margins of the education system, used sparingly only in the early years of schooling or not at all.

Furthermore, there is often a lack of political will and institutional support for the promotion of indigenous languages in education. While some African countries have adopted policies that recognise the importance of indigenous languages, the implementation of these policies is often weak or inconsistent. This is not only due to lack of resources mentioned earlier, but it is also a reflection of broader societal attitudes towards indigenous languages. In many cases, as opined by Alexander (2010), these languages are seen as backward or inferior, a perception that has been shaped by the legacy of colonialism and the dominance of Western cultural norms. Overcoming these attitudes requires concerted efforts to change societal perceptions by demonstrating the value of indigenous languages in modern education and development.

Finally, the global influence of standardised testing and curricula poses a challenge to the implementation of indigenous-language-medium education. Many African countries rely on international assessments and standardised curricula, which are often developed with a focus on colonial languages. This can create a disconnection between the language of instruction and the language of assessment, putting students



who are educated in indigenous languages at a disadvantage (Brock-Utne, 2017). To address this, there is a need for the development of assessment tools and curricula that are aligned with indigenous languages and that recognise the value of these languages in the learning process.

Case Studies: Successful Integration of Indigenous Languages in African Education

Despite the challenges, there are several successful examples of the integration of indigenous languages into education systems across Africa. These case studies highlight the potentials of indigenous-language-based improved educational outcomes, promotion of cultural preservation, and contribute to national development.

Ethiopia: Mother-Tongue Education in a Multilingual Society

Ethiopia is a country rich in linguistic diversity with over 80 languages spoken across its different ethnic groups. In recognition of this diversity, the Ethiopian government has implemented a policy of mother-tongue-medium education, where children are taught in their indigenous languages during the early years of schooling (Bodoma, 2020). This policy, which was introduced as part of the Education and Training Policy of 1994, aims to promote linguistic diversity, improve educational outcomes, and foster a sense of cultural identity among students.

The implementation of mother-tongue education in Ethiopia has been widely regarded as a success. Studies have shown that students who receive instruction in their mother tongues perform better academically, particularly in STEM, compared to those who are taught in a second language (Heugh, 2011). Furthermore, the use of indigenous languages in education has helped to promote social cohesion and national unity in a country with a history of ethnic tensions. By validating the linguistic and cultural heritage of different ethnic groups, the policy has contributed to a more inclusive and harmonious society.

However, the success of this policy has not been without challenges. The implementation of mother-tongue-medium education in Ethiopia has required significant investment in the development of teaching materials, teacher training, and the creation of standardised curricula in multiple languages. Additionally, there have been concerns about the



transition from mother-tongue-medium education in secondary to higher education, where English becomes the primary language of instruction. Despite these challenges, Ethiopia's experience demonstrates the potential benefits of integrating indigenous languages into education and provides valuable lessons for other African countries.

South Africa: Promoting Multilingualism in Education

South Africa is another country that has made significant strides in promoting the use of indigenous languages in education. Following the end of apartheid, the South African government adopted a policy of multilingualism, recognising 11 official languages, including several indigenous languages such as Zulu, Xhosa, and Sesotho (Alexander, 2010). This policy is reflected in the country's education system, where students have the right to receive instruction in their home language during the early years of schooling.

The promotion of multilingualism in South African education has had positive effects on both educational outcomes and social cohesion. Studies have shown that students who are taught in their home language in the early grades are more likely to succeed academically and to develop a strong foundation for learning additional languages, including English (Heugh, 2011). Additionally, the use of indigenous languages in education has helped to validate and elevate these languages within society, contributing to a greater sense of cultural pride and identity among South Africans.

One of the key factors contributing to the success of multilingual education in South Africa has been the strong political will and institutional support for language policy implementation. The South African government has invested in the development of teaching materials, teacher training, and language planning initiatives to support the use of indigenous languages in education. Furthermore, the country's constitution enshrines the right to receive education in one's home language, providing a legal framework for the promotion of linguistic diversity in schools.

However, challenges remain in the implementation of multilingual education in South Africa. This is especially regarding the shortage of qualified teachers who are proficient in indigenous languages. Lack of resources for the development of teaching materials is another major



bane, and the societal preference for English as a language of prestige and economic opportunity also remains a challenge. Despite these challenges, South Africa's experience provides a valuable model for other African countries seeking to promote the use of indigenous languages in education.

Nigeria: The Yoruba Language and Early Childhood Education

Nigeria is a country with over 500 languages, making it one of the most linguistically diverse nations in Africa. Despite this diversity, English remains the dominant language in education, particularly at the secondary and tertiary levels. However, there have been efforts to promote the use of indigenous languages in early childhood education, particularly in regions where a single indigenous language is widely spoken.

One such example is the use of Yoruba in early childhood education in South-western Nigeria. Yoruba is one of the three major languages in Nigeria, spoken by over 20 million people (Lawal, 2014). In recognition of the importance of linguistic and cultural continuity, several schools in the Yoruba-speaking regions have implemented programmes where children receive instruction in Yoruba during the early years of schooling (Bamgbose, 2011). These programmes have shown promising results, with students demonstrating better academic performance and a stronger connection to their cultural heritage compared to those who are taught in English from the outset.

The success of Yoruba language education in South-western Nigeria highlights the potential benefits of mother-tongue-medium instruction in early childhood education. It also underscores the importance of community involvement and support in the implementation of indigenous language education programmes. In many cases, parents and community leaders have played a key role in advocating for the use of Yoruba in schools and in supporting the development of teaching materials and curricula.

However, the expansion of indigenous language education in Nigeria faces several challenges, including the dominance of English in the education system, the lack of resources for teacher training, and the political sensitivity of language issues in a country with such linguistic diversity. Despite these challenges, the success of Yoruba language



education in Southwestern Nigeria provides valuable lessons for other regions and countries seeking to promote the use of indigenous languages in education.

Indigenous Language Education and Cognitive Development

The relationship between language and cognitive development is a key consideration in the discussion of indigenous language education. Language is not only a tool for communication but also a fundamental building block of thought and cognition.

When children learn in their mother tongue, they are able to grasp concepts more effectively because the language of instruction is aligned with their cognitive and cultural frameworks. This section explores how indigenous language education supports cognitive development, enhances academic performance, and promotes life-long learning.

Cognitive Benefits of Mother-Tongue Instruction

Research has consistently shown that children who receive education in the mother-tongue during the early years of schooling demonstrate better cognitive development compared to those who are taught in a second language. This is because learning in a familiar language allows children to focus on understanding concepts rather than deciphering the language itself (Heugh, 2011). For example, when children learn mathematics in their mother tongue, they are more likely to understand abstract concepts and apply them to real-world situations, leading to a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the subject.

Moreover, mother-tongue-medium instruction supports the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. When children are taught in a language that resonates with their cultural and social experiences, they are better able to relate new information to their existing knowledge base. This connection between language, culture, and cognition helps to foster a more holistic approach to learning, where students are encouraged to think critically and creatively (Raithel, 2015).

In addition to cognitive benefits, learning in one's mother tongue has been shown to improve memory retention and recall. This is because information learned in a familiar language is easier to encode and retrieve from memory. As a result, students who receive instruction in their mother tongue are more likely to retain what they have learned and



to build upon this knowledge in subsequent years. This cumulative effect of mother-tongue instruction is particularly important in subjects like STEM, where foundational knowledge is critical for advanced learning (Brock-Utne, 2017).

Academic Performance and Lifelong Learning

The cognitive benefits of mother-tongue-based instruction translate into improved academic performance across a range of subjects. Studies have shown that students who are taught in their mother tongue consistently outperform their peers who are taught in a second language, particularly in subjects that require a high level of cognitive engagement, such as STEM and literacy (Heugh, 2011). This academic advantage is evident not only in the early years of schooling but also in later stages, as students who have a strong foundation in their mother tongue are better equipped to learn additional languages and to succeed in higher education.

Moreover, mother-tongue instruction promotes lifelong learning by fostering love for learning and a strong sense of self-efficacy. When students are able to learn in a language that is meaningful to them, they are more likely to enjoy the learning process and to develop a positive attitude towards education. This intrinsic motivation is crucial for lifelong learning, as it encourages students to continue seeking knowledge and to engage in self-directed learning throughout their lives (UNESCO, 2016).

In addition to academic performance, mother-tongue instruction has been linked to improved social and emotional development. Children who are educated in their mother tongue are more likely to develop a strong sense of identity and self-worth, as their language and culture are validated and respected within the educational system. This positive self-concept is critical for building resilience and coping skills, which are essential for navigating the challenges of life and for achieving long-term success.

Challenges and Opportunities

While the cognitive and academic benefits of indigenous language pedagogy are clear, there are challenges to its implementation. One of the primary challenges is the lack of standardised curricula and teaching materials in indigenous languages, which can limit the effectiveness of



mother-tongue instruction. Additionally, the shortage of trained teachers who are proficient in indigenous languages poses a significant barrier to the widespread adoption of this approach (Alexander, 2010).

However, there are also opportunities for promoting indigenous language pedagogy in Africa. The growing recognition of the importance of linguistic diversity in education, coupled with advancements in technology, provides new avenues for the development of indigenous language resources and for the training of teachers. For example, digital platforms can be used to create and disseminate teaching materials in indigenous languages, making them more accessible to schools in remote and underserved areas (Adejunmobi, 2018).

In conclusion, indigenous language education offers significant cognitive and academic benefits, contributing to the overall development of students and to the achievement of sustainable development goals in Africa. By supporting mother-tongue instruction and promoting the use of indigenous languages in education, African countries can foster a more inclusive and effective educational system that benefits all students.

The Future of Indigenous Languages in African Education

The future of indigenous languages in African education is both promising and challenging. As the continent continues to navigate the complexities of globalisation, urbanisation, and technological advancement, the role of indigenous languages in education will be increasingly important in shaping the identities, cultures, and development trajectories of African societies.

Globalisation and the Role of Indigenous Languages

Globalisation has brought about significant changes in the way people communicate, learn, and interact with the world. While it has opened up new opportunities for economic growth and cultural exchange, it has also posed challenges to the preservation of indigenous languages. In many African countries, the pressure to conform to global norms and standards, particularly in education, has led to the increased use of colonial languages at the expense of indigenous languages (Mufwene, 2013).



However, globalisation also presents opportunities for the revitalisation and promotion of indigenous languages. The rise of digital media, social networks, and online learning platforms has created new spaces for the use and dissemination of indigenous languages. These platforms can be used to develop and share educational content in indigenous languages, connect speakers across different regions, and raise awareness about the importance of linguistic diversity (Adejunmobi, 2018). By leveraging these technologies, African countries can ensure that indigenous languages remain relevant and vibrant in the 21st century.

Urbanisation and Language Shift

Urbanisation is another factor that has a profound impact on the use of indigenous languages in Africa. As more people migrate to urban areas in search of better economic opportunities, there is a growing tendency for younger generations to adopt colonial languages, which are often perceived as more valuable for social mobility and economic success. This language shift can lead to the erosion of indigenous languages, particularly in urban areas where they are less commonly spoken (Brock-Utne, 2017).

To address this challenge, it is essential to promote the use of indigenous languages in urban education settings. This includes integrating indigenous languages into the curricula of urban schools, providing opportunities for students to learn and use their mother tongues in both formal and informal settings, and encouraging the development of urban language communities where indigenous languages are actively spoken and maintained. Additionally, urban language planning initiatives can help to ensure that indigenous languages are visible and valued in urban public spaces, such as signage, media, and cultural events (Alexander, 2010).

Technological Advancements and Language Preservation

Technological advancements offer new tools and strategies for the preservation and promotion of indigenous languages. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the use of technology to document, revitalise, and teach indigenous languages. This includes the development of digital dictionaries, language learning apps, and online courses that make indigenous languages more accessible to both native speakers and language learners (Akinkulore & Akinfenwa, 2018).



Moreover, technology can be used to create virtual language communities, where speakers of indigenous languages can connect, share resources, and practice their language skills. These communities can play a vital role in language preservation by providing a space for intergenerational language transmission and by fostering a sense of community among speakers. Additionally, technology can facilitate the documentation of endangered languages, helping to preserve them for future generations (Heugh, 2011).

The Role of Policy and Advocacy

The future of indigenous languages in African education will also depend on the strength of policy and advocacy efforts. Governments, educators, and civil society organisations must continue to advocate for the recognition and support of indigenous languages in education. This includes the development and implementation of language policies that prioritise indigenous languages, the allocation of resources for indigenous language education programmes, and the promotion of public awareness about the importance of linguistic diversity (UNESCO, 2008).

In addition to policy efforts, grassroots advocacy and community involvement will be essential for the successful implementation of indigenous language education programmes. Communities must be actively engaged in the development and promotion of indigenous language education, and their voices must be heard in policy discussions and decision-making processes. By working together, governments, educators, and communities can ensure that indigenous languages remain a vital part of African education and that they continue to play a central role in shaping the continent's future.

A Vision for the Future

Looking ahead, the integration of indigenous languages into African education has the potential to transform the continent's educational landscape. By embracing linguistic diversity and promoting the use of indigenous languages in education, African countries can create a more inclusive, culturally relevant, and effective education system that meets the needs of all students. This vision for the future of African education is one where indigenous language is not just preserved, but celebrated



and used as powerful tools for learning, communication, and development.

As Africa continues to strive for sustainable development, the role of indigenous languages in education will be increasingly important in building a more equitable and prosperous future. By recognising the value of indigenous languages and investing in their promotion and preservation, African countries can ensure that future generations are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and cultural grounding they need to succeed in a rapidly changing world.

Policy Recommendations for Strengthening Indigenous Language Education

To fully realise the potential of indigenous languages in education, African governments, educators, and development partners must work together to create an enabling environment for indigenous language pedagogy. The following policy recommendations are designed to support the integration of indigenous languages into the education system and to enhance their role in promoting sustainable development.

1. Development of Comprehensive Language Policies

Governments across African countries should develop and implement comprehensive language policies that recognise and support the use of indigenous languages in education. These policies should provide a clear framework for the integration of indigenous languages into the curriculum, teacher training programmes, and assessment systems. Additionally, they should ensure that language policies give equal status to indigenous languages with the colonial languages in the education system, and that students have the right to receive instruction in their mother-tongue (Bamgbose, 2011).

2. Investment in Teacher Training and Professional Development

Teacher training is critical to the success of indigenous language pedagogy. Governments and development partners should invest in the training and professional development of teachers who are proficient in indigenous languages. This includes providing pre-service and in-service training programmes that equip teachers with the skills and knowledge needed to effectively teach in indigenous languages. Additionally, teachers should be supported with ongoing professional



development opportunities to enhance their language proficiency and pedagogical skills (Alexander, 2010).

3. Development and Distribution of Teaching Materials in Indigenous Languages

The development and distribution of teaching materials in indigenous languages are essential for the successful implementation of indigenous language pedagogy. Governments and educational institutions should collaborate with linguists, educators, and community leaders to create high-quality, culturally relevant teaching materials in indigenous languages. These materials should be made available to schools at all levels of the education system, including early childhood, primary, secondary, and tertiary education (UNESCO, 2008).

4. Promotion of Community Involvement and Support

Community involvement is crucial for the success of indigenous language education programmes. Governments and educational institutions should actively engage with local communities, parents, and cultural leaders to gain their support and involvement in the implementation of indigenous language pedagogy. This includes raising awareness about the benefits of mother-tongue instruction, involving communities in the development of curricula and teaching materials, and encouraging parents to support their children's education in their mother tongue (Mpaata et al., 2020).

5. Leveraging Technology for Indigenous Language Education

Technology offers new opportunities for promoting indigenous language education in Africa. Governments and development partners should invest in the development of digital platforms and resources that support the teaching and learning of indigenous languages. This includes creating online courses, mobile applications, and digital libraries that provide access to teaching materials, language resources, and professional development opportunities for teachers. Additionally, technology can be used to connect educators and students across different regions, facilitating the exchange of knowledge and best practices (Adejunmobi, 2018).



6. Monitoring and Evaluation of Indigenous Language Education Programmes

Monitoring and evaluation are critical components of effective policy implementation. Governments and educational institutions should establish robust monitoring and evaluation systems to assess the impact of indigenous language education programmes. This includes collecting data on students' performance, teacher effectiveness, and programme outcomes, as well as conducting regular reviews of language policies and curricula. By monitoring and evaluating these programs, policymakers can identify areas for improvement and make evidence-based decisions to strengthen indigenous language pedagogy (Heugh, 2011).

Conclusion

Indigenous languages are at the heart of Africa's cultural heritage and are essential for the continent's sustainable development. In the realm of education, indigenous languages offer a unique opportunity to create a more inclusive and effective educational system that reflects the diverse linguistic and cultural realities of African societies. Through the integration of indigenous languages into pedagogy, African countries can improve educational outcomes, promote social cohesion, and contribute to the preservation of cultural identity.

This article has explored the critical role of indigenous languages in African pedagogy, highlighting the cognitive and academic benefits of mother-tongue instruction, the challenges of implementing indigenous language education, and the successes of various case studies across the continent. It has also provided policy recommendations for strengthening indigenous language pedagogy and discussed the future of indigenous languages in African education in the context of globalisation, urbanisation, and technological advancement.

Ultimately, the promotion of indigenous languages in education is not just a matter of cultural preservation but a key component of sustainable development. By investing in indigenous language education, African countries can ensure that their education systems are more inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the needs of all students. This vision for the future of African education is one where indigenous languages are not



just surviving but thriving, contributing to the continent's development and prosperity for generations to come.

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