

**THE IMPLEMENTATION OF NIGERIAN LANGUAGE POLICY IN  
GWAGWALADA AREA COUNCIL OF ABUJA: A CHALLENGE TO PRIMARY  
EDUCATION IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup>  
CENTURY**

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**Abstract**

This paper is the report of an investigation into the problems that confront the successful implementation of Nigerian Language policy within Gwagwalada Area Council of Abuja. Five Primary Schools made up of four government owned institutions and one private school were selected for the study. A total number of 120 pupils were requested through questionnaire to indicate a particular language they study in school and the efforts government is making towards the study of Nigerian Languages in the area. The data analysis reveal that although pupils have interest in learning these languages, there is nobody to teach them. The implication is that the policy of making indigenous languages as the medium of instruction in primary schools within Gwagwalada Area Council of Abuja will be unrealistic. A language group system is therefore, suggested to redeem our natural identity otherwise Nigeria stands the risk of losing her local languages before the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

**Introduction**

The influence of colonial masters on Nigerian educational system was significant especially in the development of Nigerian Languages. This period of colonization was dominated by Missionary Societies such as, the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) and the Church Missionary Society (CMS). While the Church Missionary Society emphasized the need of educating a child in his own native language, the Muslim counterpart on the hand promoted bilingualism i.e. Arabic and Local Languages. This helps in achieving the aim of religious instruction as a means of evangelization and Yunusa (2000:61) notes that one of the aims of Islamic education is to make individual appreciate the place of Allah as the maker of all things. On the other hand, Ezea (2004) remarks that the Church Missionary Society between 1816 and 1817 attempted to introduce the teaching of vernacular in West African schools because they felt, it is necessary to communicate to people using their own language.'

Unfortunately for them, the posture of these missionaries towards the use of local languages as a medium of instruction in schools was short-lived in that a lot of policies that negate their earlier intentions were promulgated. One of such policies, was the inclusion of English to be learnt along with vernacular. The 1882 Education Ordinance for African schools based on British Act of 1884 backed the policy. The missionary policy as well as the British education ordinance as they affect local languages were widely criticized. Lewis (1962) decried the policy contending that the greatest injustice and disservice to humanity is to deprive people of their language. Spencer (1971) noted that the missionary's choice of using local languages as medium of instruction was for selfish interest rather than educating Africans. Emenyonu (1978:21) as quoted by Eke (1999:18) and Ezea (2004) agree that the primary aim of early missionaries was to use local languages as a means of evangelizing them not necessarily for education sake. Notwithstanding these criticisms, the history of Nigerian Language evolution will not be complete without acknowledging the efforts of early missionaries even though they had ulterior motives doing that. For instance, it was their efforts that led to the production of the orthographies of our local languages like Hausa, Igbo, Edo, Igala, and Yoruba.

Consequently, in Nigeria a lot of language policies have been introduced through the National Policy on Education. The FRN (1977, 1981, 1989, 1998 and 2004) as it affects Nigerian languages states... in the interest of national unity it is expedient that every child should be required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. The phrase "major" in the previous editions has been replaced in 1998 and 2004 with *one of the three...* This is a welcome development as it will make the development of Nigerian Languages easier considering the heated argument it has generated in the past.

Similarly, at the primary level the policy specifically provided that the medium of instruction shall be the language of environment for the first three years. It also gave status to English, saying that it shall be taught as a school subject.

The government policy regarding the use of local language cum mother - tongue has been generally condemned- Bamgbose (1992). Ogbonnn (2001) argue that the three years duration is too short to make a child literate in mother-tongue and English Language. Others insist that mother -tongue at lower level of education system will deter his cognitive ability. These views have been refuted by Fafunwa (2002). UNESCO (1953) that it will rather help a child to think and express himself naturally. Abimbola (2004:RI3) informs us that the superstructure of fluent self-expression in the mother -tongue is essential for linguistic self-confidence and whatever language skills to be acquired later in life. Ezea (2004) cautions that criticism upon criticism on mother-tongue policy does more harm on the development of Nigerian languages than good. He advised that actual number of Nigerian languages should be ascertained. So far he concludes, various figures on Nigerian Languages have given. For instance Bamgbose (1977) says 400, Ezea (1990) 450, Olaofe (1990) under 400, Odetokun (1997), 430 etc. Ascertaining the number of Nigerian languages will help in developing them bearing in mind that multilingualism is not peculiar to Nigeria. Other countries like USA, Soviet Union (Russia) China. Japan had the same language problems yet today they have achieved a lot technologically through the use of local languages. To cap it up, Olagoke (1979) advises that for the interest of Nigeria, each language community should be allowed to develop for posterity.

From the above efforts made by the early missionary, Government, and the criticism that followed, we can see that everybody appreciates the importance of language in our life which Ezea, (2003; Aliyu, (1985; Hornby. (2001) and Azikiwe, (1998) describe as the means of communication and expression of one's feelings, desires and thoughts. The use of language cannot be overstressed. It is used to impart knowledge to the learner. It promotes the culture of individuals. It is also a special tool for educating a child.

The purpose of this study is therefore, to ascertain how the study of Nigerian Languages within Gwagwalada Area Council of Abuja is being implemented bearing in mind that FCT Abuja is a miniature of Nigeria's populace with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The study dealt with the following research questions.

1. Are Nigeria Languages taught in primary schools in Gwagwalada Area Council?
2. What are the major problems that militate against the study of Nigerian languages in primary schools?
3. What are the pupils' reactions towards the learning of Nigerian Languages in primary Schools?
4. What are the government's efforts towards the learning of Nigerian languages in primary Schools?

## **Methodology**

The sample of the study consists of 120 primary six pupils randomly selected from five primary schools within Gwagwalada Area Council of Abuja. The sampling was done in this order. Four schools are owned by the Government while one school is managed by an individual. The schools are all co-educational. Also the pupils are from diverse tribes and backgrounds in Nigeria like Ilausa, Igala Gwari, Koro, Efiki, Igbo, Yoruba, Edo, Kvvale etc. The researcher made these careful selections in order to ascertain how Nigerian languages are implemented in these two levels of our educational system within Gwagwalada Area Council.

A survey research method was used in conducting the study. A structured questionnaire was issued over it and all of them were duly answered and returned. The respondents were required to indicate whether or not they offer any of the Nigerian Languages like Gwari, Hausa and others. They were also expected to indicate problems hampering the studying of these languages and government efforts towards the learning of Nigerian languages in the area. The information obtained were presented in tables and analyzed by the use of frequency and simple percentage.

## **Data Analysis and the Result of the Study**

The data collected are analyzed in simple percentage and presented in frequency tables.

Description of data related to the research question one. Are Nigerian Languages taught in primary schools in Gwagwalada Area Council?

**Table I: Pupils' Response on Whether or Not Nigerian Languages are Taught in Primary Schools Within Gwagwalada Area Council**

Nigerian Languages	Frequency	Percentages %
Yes	20	16.7
No	100	83.3
Total	120	100%

Table I above indicates that only 16.7% of the respondents admitted that they offer Nigerian Languages. A greater percentage of the respondents answered negatively showing that they do not study any of the Nigerian Languages at all. This constitutes 83.3% of the total respondents. The answer indicates a negation of National Language Policy as it affects Nigerian Languages.

Asked which of the Nigerian Languages they offer, the respondents indicated Hausa. Even at that, it is poor with only 16.7% of the total respondents.

Description of data related to the research question two (2). What are the major problems militating against the study of Nigerian languages in primary schools?

**Table 2: Pupils Response on the Major Problems Militating Against the Study of Nigerian Languages in Primary Schools**

Nigerian Languages	Major problems	Frequency	Percentage %
e.g Hausa Igbo	No teacher.	102	85
Yoruba, Edo, Efiki, Ebira, Igala, Gwari Gbagiji, Fulani, Ijawetc	Lack of teaching materials.	1	0.8
	Societal attitudes.	15	12.5
	No encouragement from parents.	2	1.7
Total		120	100%

Table 2 indicates that the greatest problem facing the study of Nigerian languages in primary school is shortage of teachers. This constitutes 85% of the total respondents. Also 12.5% of the respondents indicated that they have no interest in the languages. Lack of teaching materials and encouragement from parents constituted only 0.8% and 1.7% respectively as shown on the table.

Description of data related to the research question 3. What are the pupils' reactions towards the learning of Nigeria Languages in primary school?

**Table 3: Pupils' Reactions Towards the Learning of Nigerian Languages**

Nigerian Languages	Pupils' reactions towards Nigerian Languages	Frequency	Percentage (%)
E.g Hausa, Igbo, Edo Edo, Efiki, Yoruba Ebira, Igala, Gwari, Gbagyi, Fulani, Tjaw Etc	I like it. It is difficult to learn. It is not my parents' wish. People will laugh at me.	55	45.8
		05	4.2
		10	8.3
		50	41.7
Total		120	100%

Table 3 shows the distribution of pupils' reactions towards the learning of Nigerian languages in Primary Schools. 45.8% of the total respondents indicated that they like studying Nigeria

languages. 4. 2% expressed dislike due to difficulties encountered in the study of Nigerian languages. While 8.3% say that it is against their parents' wish. The table further shows that 41.7% fear that members of public will jeer at them if they discover that they study "Nigerian Languages. This posture from the members of public is worrisome.

Description of data related to research question 4. What are the government's efforts towards the learning of "Nigerian Languages in Primary Schools?

Nigerian Languages	What Govt. has provided towards learning of Nigerian Languages	Frequency	Percentage %
E.g. Hausa, Igbo, Edo Edo, Efiki, Ebira, Yoruba, Igala, Gwari, Gbayi, Fulani, Ijaw etc.	Teachers	2	1.7
	Textbooks	10	8.3
	Language Laboratory	-	0.00
	Pictures / Video Cassette Player	-	0.00
	None	108	90
Total		120	100%

**Table 4: Pupils' Reaction on Government Efforts Towards the Learning of Nigerian Languages**

As seen in Table 4 above, 1.7% accepted that they were provided with teachers by the government. 8.3% say they were given textbooks. While 90% of the total respondents answered negatively indicating that nothing at all has been given to them by the government towards the study of Nigerian languages in primary schools. This is a very big problem and it requires the attention of all stakeholders.

#### Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that the greatest problem hampering the implementation of Nigerian languages in Gwagwalada Area Council of Abuja is shortage of teachers to handle the subject(s). This is a very serious matter as teachers are the pillar of any educational system. FRN (1998, 2004, Atadoga 1988, Ezca, 2004) contend that the quality of any educational system depends, largely on the caliber of teachers put in place. Wako (2005) notes that the issue of qualified teachers to handle Nigerian languages at primary level has given the National Commission for Primary Education a lot of concern.

It was also observed that although pupils have interest in learning Nigerian languages, societal attitudes hamper their moral as shown in Table 4 where the interest to learn Nigerian languages is at close range with the societal attitude- 41.7% and 45.8% recorded. The parents' wish towards the choice of Nigerian Languages offered by the pupils should not be neglected because everything a child does in school stems from the home.

Another revelation made in the study was the pupils' complaints that Nigerian Languages are many and therefore, difficult to learn. Many people have expressed such fears on the ground that Nigeria is a multilingual and multicultural country. To this, Kashoki (1978) advises Nigerians to borrow a new leaf from countries like Japan, China, Russia, who have made their indigenous languages the medium of instruction in their schools. He further noted that Japan's decision to implement indigenous language policy is the secret behind her landmark success in technological advancement all over the world. It is interesting to note that already the FCT Primary Education Board has mapped out plans aimed at addressing the language problem in the area. Some of them include: the development of curriculum in Nigerian languages, good budgetary allocation to the promotion of Nigerian languages and recruitment of specialists in the languages.

The pupils' response on Table 4 also revealed that much is still expected from Government to encourage the study of our local Languages especially within Gwagwalada Area Council of Abuja. 90% of the total respondents agreed that nothing has been provided by government towards the learning of Nigerian languages. Only 8.3% indicated of given textbooks but no teacher. The irony of it all is that in some areas, there is availability of teachers but no books. While those who were supplied with, books by UBE, have no teacher to take them or make use of the materials. This is an issue the government has to properly address for the future of our children. Teaching materials are very important in any educational system. Without them nothing could be achieved meaningfully in learning and teaching. It makes learning easy and reduces the amount of talk on part of the teachers. It equally sustains the pupils' interest in learning.

### **Conclusion**

The following conclusions were drawn from the study carried out.

1. There is evidence that Nigerian languages are not taught in most of our primary schools. This is against the National Language policy that the medium of instruction in primary schools shall be local languages. It was also concluded that foreign languages such as English and French are preferred to our languages. In fact one of the science schools visited is making arrangement to employ French teachers at the detriment of Nigerian languages. Also Pidgin English is mostly used in these schools as the medium of instruction due to multilingual nature of Abuja. This implies that the policy has been bastardized, the learners come out more confused than ever and the use of pidgin even though it might aid comprehension, still leaves the learners ill prepared to use English and the local languages academically.
2. There is acute shortage of teachers in Nigerian languages within the area of study.
3. There is also a heightened fear of societal attitudes towards the learners of Nigerian Languages in our schools. Pupils who have interest in the languages are scared away because of public ridicule.
4. Government's efforts in encouraging the study of Nigerian languages in our primary school is low, in terms of providing teaching materials like textbooks, video cassette player etc. Also not appreciable efforts have been made by Government to employ Nigerian Language teachers.

The overall implication is that Nigerian languages may gradually die out in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond if this trend is not urgently checked. Furthermore, the non-implementation of Nigerian language policy within the zone will affect pupils' performance in secondary schools and tertiary institutions. There are some of them who have the interest in learning the language but are not given the opportunity to do so. It creates problems for the lecturers in Colleges of Education for those who wish to start it at pre-NCE level. The most far-reaching implication of it is that it will actually make Nigerian child to think that he has no language and that everything around him is imported including his father's village.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made.

1. The study of Nigerian languages in primary schools should be totally implemented. This will enable children acquire both the communicative and written competence in the language before they proceed to secondary schools. It will also help our children to appreciate their rich cultural heritage since language is a medium through which our culture is expressed.
2. The heated argument surrounding the mother-tongue policy should be played down to pave way for the development of our indigenous languages. The aspersions cast on the learners of Nigerian languages should be closely monitored and totally eradicated. Members of public should be made to understand the implications of such attitude through public enlightenment using radio, television, Internet, newspapers etc.

The issue of acute shortage of teachers in the area should be urgently addressed by training and re-training Nigerian Language Teachers. The Federal Capital Development Authority (FCDA) Abuja should work with FCT College of Education Zuba to provide Nigeriann language teachers in the primary schools within Gwagwalada Area Council and Abuja in general. In fact the only Hausa teacher in one of the schools visited is a graduate of the college.

4. The plan of FCT Primary Education Board to allocate a reasonable amount of her budget to the development of Nigerian languages in Abuja should be emulated by the Federal, States, and Local Governments of Nigerian. The Federal Government can get the ETF to intervene in

- a special programme to promote the study of Nigerian Languages in the country.
5. Although government is doing the best to provide infrastructure facilities in our schools, much still needs to be done in respect of Nigerian languages within Abuja to fully realize the goal of her first Education summit held last year. FCDA Abuja should set aside 5% of her annual budget in Education for the implementation of Nigerian languages in the territory.
  6. Parents should be encouraged to speak their local languages to their children. The worst aspect of it all is that most of the children do not know our languages.
  7. The issue of multilingual nature of Nigeria should be tackled by language groupings. Odetokun (1997:90) is of the view that language groupings that have similarities can study one major language in the area and enumerates them as follows:

<b>Hausa:</b>	Sokoto, Kano, Katsina, Kaduna etc.
<b>Igbo:</b>	Anambra, Enugu, Abia, Imo, Ebonyi, and some parts of Delta State.
<b>Yoruba:</b>	Oyo, Osun, Lagos, Ekiti, and some parts of Kogi and Edo states.
<b>Edo:</b>	Hsekire, Uroboh, Ijaw, in Edo, Delta and Rivers.
<b>Ebira:</b>	Nupe, Gwari, Igala, FCT Abuja and some parts of Niger State.
<b>Kambarawa:</b>	Nufawa and Batomi in Kebbi and Zamfara States.
<b>Iliron:</b>	Tibi, and Angas in Plateau, Benue, and Lafia in Benue State.
<b>Barebari:</b>	Tibi, Margi, Longuda and Fulfude in Bornu, Bauchi, Gongola and Adamawa State.

Odetokun (1997) finally notes that the acquisition of the selected languages will be easily learnt among those people whose languages are contiguous and have similar traditions.

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