

The Conundrum of Language-of-Instruction Policy in 21st-Century Nigerian Education: A Constructive Critique of the Mother-Tongue Cancellation

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Abstract

Language-of-instruction (LoI) policies in post-colonial, multilingual nations like Nigeria represent a volatile intersection of cognitive science, political economy, socio-cultural preservation, and global competitiveness. This article presents a comprehensive theoretical and constructive critique of the landmark November 2025 decision by the Federal Government of Nigeria to completely scrap the mother-tongue teaching policy and reinstate English as the sole language of instruction across the basic education system. Formally pronounced by the Minister of Education, Dr Maruf Tunji Alausa, during the 69th National Council on Education (NCE) meeting in Akure, Ondo State in October, 2025. This strategic pivot was driven by alarming empirical drops in baseline literacy and mass failure rates in standardized regional examinations (WAEC, NECO, JAMB) across regions that heavily relied on native language instruction. While pedagogical orthodoxy—heavily supported by classical UNESCO (1953) tenets—maintains that early concept formation is optimized via a child's first language (L1), this paper analyzes the structural breakdowns, multi-lingual urban dynamics, and parent-driven economic pressures that rendered the previous mandate unworkable. Utilizing verified press reportage from major Nigerian dailies (Punch, Vanguard, EduCeleb), this paper examines the 21st-century realities of a digitized knowledge economy that demand early English immersion. Ultimately, a constructive paradigm is proposed: rather than falling back on rigid, un-scaffolded English drills that risk perpetuating rote-memorization chanting cultures, Nigerian basic classrooms must institutionalize translanguaging and pedagogical scaffolding to preserve cognitive integrity while simultaneously engineering globally competitive human capital.

Keywords: *Language of instruction Policy, Mother Tongue preservation and cancellation; English Immersion, Educational Scaffolding.*

Introduction

The choice of language of instruction (LoI) in early childhood and basic education is never a neutral pedagogical choice. It serves as a defining statement of a nation's geopolitical alignment, preservation of cultural heritage, internal socio-political power dynamics, and vision for long-term human capital development. In post-colonial African states, including Nigeria, this choice is particularly fraught. West African nations in particular constantly balance the preservation of indigenous cultural identities against the practical need for a global

lingua franca to drive economic advancement. For nearly half a century, Nigeria's linguistic architecture in education was governed by a bilingual transition model, traditionally mandating that the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community should serve as the medium of instruction at the pre-primary and lower primary levels (Primary 1-3), with English introduced as a secondary subject (NERDC, 2014).

However, in October, 2025, the Nigerian educational landscape experienced an unprecedented administrative pivot. The Federal Government, through the Minister of Education, Dr Maruf Tunji Alausa, officially announced the complete scrapping of the indigenous language policy during the 69th National Council on Education (NCE) assembly held in Akure, Ondo State. The mandate reinstated English as the exclusive, universal medium of instruction from pre-primary up to tertiary education levels (Erunke, 2025; Oyelakin, 2025). As reported by Vanguard (2025), this drastic reversal directly answered a major national crisis in student performance, replacing political sentiment with hard, evidence-based educational planning. The Federal Government made it clear that the state could no longer afford to prioritize unworkable language policies at the expense of educational output.

To evaluate this policy change effectively, one must look beyond a simple binary opposition between Western cultural dominance and indigenous preservation. Instead, it requires a multifaceted analysis that examines the neurocognitive principles of early literacy, the sociolinguistic realities of modern multi-ethnic urban centers, and the structural constraints of the Nigerian educational system. This theoretical critique offers a constructive analysis of the 2025 mother-tongue cancellation. It evaluates the executive reversal through the lens of 21st-century global realities, while highlighting the cognitive risks that could arise if its implementation lacks rigorous, supportive instructional design. To this end, this paper tries to answer the following questions:

Research Questions

The following research questions were answered in this study:

1. What are the positions of educational theories on the implementation of language of instruction Policy?
2. Considering the realities in Nigeria educational practices, are the justifications given for the scrapping of mother-tongue completely valid?
3. With the scientific and technology advancement, can sole implementation of mother-tongue as language of instruction provide an adequate educational foundation for Nigerian children?

In order to understand the impact of the 2025 reversal, it is necessary to first examine the deep theoretical foundations that supported the historical native-language framework. The international consensus on early childhood mother-tongue instruction was largely established by the seminal UNESCO declaration of 1953, which stated that the best medium for teaching a child is their mother tongue. This position was not merely a sentimental defense of cultural heritage; it was rooted in the cognitive science of how a child constructs meaning, decodes symbols, and develops higher-order thinking skills.

Psycholinguistic theory posits that a child's first language (L1) is the primary vehicle for internal thought, conceptual mapping, and self-regulation. According to Lev Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of child development, learning is an inherently social process mediated by language. The L1 serves as the primary tool within the child's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), allowing them to bridge the gap between concrete, everyday sensory experiences and the abstract, symbolic concepts introduced by a school curriculum (Vygotsky, 1978). When early instruction is delivered in the L1, the cognitive load associated with learning is optimized; the child is not forced to perform a dual cognitive operation deciphering an unfamiliar linguistic code while simultaneously trying to understand an abstract academic concept (Wood et al., 1976).

This cognitive phenomenon is best explained by Jim Cummins' (1979) Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis, which distinguishes between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Cummins argued that beneath the surface differences of individual languages lies a Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP). When a child develops CALP in their first language, they are building a deep, cross-linguistic cognitive foundation comprising literacy strategies, phonological awareness, and abstract reasoning that can be easily transferred to a second language (L2), such as English (Cummins, 1979; Cummins & Carey, 1979; as cited in Kyuchukov, 2023; Awopetu, 2016). The traditional policy framework in Nigeria was built upon this exact premise, aiming to secure a stable cognitive foundation in the native tongue before transitioning into formal English instruction.

Despite the undeniable theoretical basis for of mother-tongue instructions, its practical application within Nigerian classrooms encountered severe systemic barriers. The recent policy pivot was a direct response to a massive, empirical crisis in educational outcomes unveiled by the federal administration (EduCeleb, 2025). The Minister of Education explicitly targeted the previous 2022 National Language Policy, noting that over-reliance on native instruction had inadvertently created severe academic deficits in core testing areas. As reported by Punch, Dr Maruf Tunji Alausa disclosed a sharp drop in national literacy indices, linking the mother-tongue mandate to a massive fail rate in major terminal examinations (Oyelakin, 2025). The questions here are: To what extent was the mother-tongue instruction policy implemented in Nigerian public and private schools between 2022 and 2025? How adequate are other learning resources provided in schools?

The most significant operational barrier to the traditional mother-tongue framework was the hyper-multilingual nature of modern Nigerian cities. Urban centers such as Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, or Ibadan have become demographic melting pots due to intense internal migration. A typical lower primary classroom in an urban center may contain children from a dozen different linguistic backgrounds, including Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Edo, Ijaw, and Urhobo. If a teacher selects the dominant regional language as the exclusive medium of instruction, children from minority groups are instantly marginalized, defeating the original equity goals of native schooling. The questions here are: What will happen to our native languages when our children are not exposed to them at early years? What will happen to our culture when our languages go into an extinction?

Furthermore, a successful mother-tongue instructional model demands a massive logistical infrastructure. It requires highly standardized, phonetically engineered textbooks across

hundreds of indigenous languages; specialized teacher preparation programs; and an ongoing supply of culturally relevant literacy materials. The Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) faced extreme resource constraints in translating core mathematics and science curricula into more than a tiny fraction of the nation's 500+ indigenous languages. Consequently, teachers were routinely forced into an un-scaffolded, direct delivery of English instruction out of practical necessity, turning the top-down policy into an institutional myth while students suffered from a lack of formal linguistic direction (Bidwell & Watine, 2014). The questions here: Are scholars in different subject areas from different tribes were assigned to write the text materials but failed? Are the students trained to use the mother-tongue while in training?

The 21st-Century Justification: Global Realities and the Case for Early English Immersion

The modern global economy is fundamentally driven by digital networks, automated software, cloud computing, and cross-border knowledge services—all of which operate primarily in the English language. English has cemented its role as the undisputed operating system of global commerce, technological innovation, and scientific research, with over 80% of all digitized data stored in global networks composed in English.

For a developing nation like Nigeria, which seeks to position its massive youth population as a competitive hub for global tech talent and remote digital services, delayed mastery of English carries a devastating economic penalty. Proponents of early immersion argue that introducing English as the primary medium of instruction from the pre-primary level gives children a vital head start, allowing them to acquire phonemic fluency, advanced reading comprehension, and technical vocabulary during their peak neurocognitive windows for language absorption. This economic reality explains the explosion of low-cost private schools throughout Nigeria, where early English immersion has long been used as a primary marketing strategy to satisfy parental demands for upward social mobility and international competitiveness.

While the economic and practical justifications for the 2025 executive reversal are supported by empirical test scores, a constructive critique requires examining the potential cognitive risks of completely removing native language support during a child's early developmental years. Completely eliminating the native language can create significant pedagogical vulnerabilities if the transition is not managed carefully.

The most immediate risk of an un-scaffolded transition to exclusive English instruction is the rapid spread of mechanical learning patterns. When young children are taught complex scientific or mathematical concepts in a language they have not yet mastered at home, they cannot engage in genuine conceptual analysis or critical discovery. Instead, they default to rote memorization as a survival mechanism. This issue frequently manifests as an early classroom culture focused on repetitive choral chanting, where children mimic the teacher's pronunciation of English phrases and numeric sequences without understanding their underlying quantitative or logical meaning (Ogunyemi & Ragpot, 2015).

Language is not just a tool for sharing information; it is also a vital psychological anchor and a repository of cultural identity. When a child enters an early childhood classroom and finds their native language completely excluded from formal instruction, it can create a subtle

psychological barrier, signaling that their home environment, parental culture, and community knowledge systems are valueless in formal society. This alienating experience can erode a child's academic self-efficacy and confidence, detaching the classroom from the home. Furthermore, early native-language erasure threatens Nigeria's rich intangible cultural heritage, risking the long-term survival of indigenous languages if successive generations fail to develop academic literacy in their native tongues.

Strategic Recommendations: Toward an Integrated, Scaffolded Model for Nigeria

A constructive critique must move beyond highlighting policy flaws to offer actionable, structural alternatives. Nigeria does not need to choose between an unworkable, over-indexed mother-tongue policy and an un-scaffolded English-only model that risks leaving children disengaged. Instead, the nation can pioneer an integrated, linguistically scaffolded framework designed for 21st-century basic classrooms.

While English serves as the official medium of instruction to satisfy global competitiveness, teachers in lower primary classes must be explicitly trained to use trans-linguaging and systematic scaffolding strategies. Teachers should not penalize or ban the use of indigenous words in the classroom. Instead, they can use the child's native tongue as a temporary bridge within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This approach can be embedded directly into lesson plans using clear, dual-language techniques. For example, when introducing a new scientific or mathematical term in English, the educator can co-introduce the local realia equivalents, utilizing native terms to anchor the core concept before systematically shifting the academic discussion entirely into English. This approach reduces cognitive overload and helps prevent the growth of disengaged rote-chanting cultures.

Importantly, removing the mother tongue as the medium of instruction must not mean removing it from the school environment entirely. To protect the country's rich indigenous linguistic heritage, the regional language or the language of the immediate community should remain a compulsory academic subject from Primary 1 through secondary education levels. This structural distinction separates the tool used for acquiring general knowledge (English) from the tool used for cultural preservation (L1), ensuring that modern Nigerian graduates grow up culturally grounded, intellectually independent, and fully equipped to compete in the global knowledge economy.

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