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Language Policy and the Status of Hausa in a Multilingual African Education System

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Abstract

Nigeria's multilingual education system seeks to balance the use of English with the development of indigenous languages. Hausa, a widely used language in northern Nigeria and parts of West Africa, has substantial potential to support learning, cultural continuity, and inclusive education; however, its role in formal schooling remains limited. This study examines the status of Hausa in Nigeria's multilingual education system and assesses how language policy affects its educational use. A qualitative descriptive documentary analysis was conducted using policy documents and recent scholarship on multilingual education, language planning, and Hausa language development. The review found that Hausa has a strong sociolinguistic position and growing digital resources, but policy implementation is inconsistent. Continued dominance of English, shortages of qualified teachers and instructional materials, inadequate funding, and limited institutional commitment constrain Hausa instruction. The study concludes that Hausa can contribute more effectively to literacy, educational inclusion, and cultural preservation when policy provisions are implemented consistently. It recommends sustained teacher preparation, investment in print and digital learning resources, and stronger integration of Hausa into school curricula.

Keywords: *Hausa language; Language policy; Multilingual education; Indigenous languages; Language planning; Nigeria*

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Background of the Study

Language is central to human interaction and plays a vital role in education, cultural continuity, and social development. Beyond facilitating communication, it shapes how knowledge is transmitted, values are preserved, and individuals participate in national life. For this reason, language policy has become an important aspect of educational planning, especially in multilingual societies where decisions must be made regarding the recognition, use, and promotion of different languages within schools and other public institutions (UNESCO, 2023).

Nigeria is widely recognized for its remarkable linguistic diversity. With over 500 indigenous languages spoken across the country, it ranks among the most multilingual nations in the world (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2024). This diversity represents a valuable cultural asset that reflects the country's rich historical and ethnic heritage. At the same time, it poses significant challenges for policymakers responsible for developing inclusive educational programmes, selecting appropriate languages of instruction, and ensuring equal learning opportunities for children from different linguistic backgrounds. Among the major indigenous languages, Hausa occupies a particularly significant position. It is one of the most widely spoken African languages, serving millions of people as both a first and second language. Current estimates indicate that Hausa has more than 70 million native speakers and over 90 million additional users across Nigeria and other parts of West Africa (Ethnologue, 2024).

Its widespread use extends beyond everyday communication, as it functions as a common language in commerce, religious activities, broadcasting, literature, and interpersonal relations across the region (Abubakar, 2022). In spite of its broad acceptance and practical importance, Hausa has not achieved a corresponding level of integration within Nigeria's formal education system. National education policies encourage the use of indigenous languages, particularly during the early years of basic education, to improve learning outcomes and preserve local languages (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). However, the implementation of these policy provisions has been uneven across states and educational institutions. As a result, English continues to be the dominant language of teaching, examinations, official communication, and academic scholarship. Against this background, this paper examines the place of Hausa within Nigeria's multilingual educational setting by analysing the influence of language policy on its development and use. It reviews relevant policy documents, discusses major theoretical perspectives on multilingual education and language planning, evaluates the challenges affecting policy implementation, and identifies practical measures that could strengthen the teaching and learning of Hausa in schools. In doing so, the paper contributes to broader discussions on indigenous language development, educational equity, and sustainable multilingual education in Nigeria.

Background to Language Policy in Nigeria

The evolution of language policy in Nigeria has been shaped by the country's historical experience, political transformation, and educational aspirations. Before the advent of

colonial rule, indigenous languages were the principal means through which communities conducted governance, transmitted cultural values, educated younger generations, and maintained social interaction (Bamgbose, 2021). Each ethnic group relied on its native language to preserve traditions, facilitate communication, and strengthen communal identity. The colonial era brought significant changes to this linguistic landscape. With the establishment of British administration, English gradually became the official language of government, commerce, and formal schooling. After Nigeria attained independence in 1960, the government was confronted with the task of building national unity while recognizing the country's extensive linguistic diversity. This challenge influenced the formulation of educational policies designed to accommodate both English and indigenous languages within the national education system. Nigeria's National Policy on Education recommends that children should receive instruction in the language of their immediate environment or their mother tongue during the early years of primary education.

As learners advance through the school system, English is expected to assume a more prominent role as the language of instruction (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). This approach reflects international advocacy for mother-tongue-based multilingual education, which emphasizes the educational benefits of teaching children in languages they understand best during their formative years (UNESCO, 2023). Evidence from educational research has consistently shown that early instruction in a learner's first language contributes to stronger academic achievement. Children who begin their education through a familiar language generally develop literacy skills more rapidly, demonstrate deeper understanding of classroom concepts, and perform better academically than those who are taught exclusively in a second language from the outset (Cummins, 2021; Benson, 2022). Despite these policy intentions and research findings, implementation has remained uneven across Nigeria. In many schools, English continues to dominate classroom instruction, assessment, and official academic activities, while the use of indigenous languages is often limited. This gap between policy and practice has slowed efforts to promote multilingual education and fully realize the educational benefits associated with mother-tongue instruction (Hazzan, 2024).

Statement of the Problem

Although national education policies encourage the use of indigenous languages in teaching and learning, Hausa has not been fully integrated into classroom instruction in many parts of Nigeria. Despite being one of the country's most widely spoken languages and an important vehicle for cultural expression and communication, its role in formal education remains limited. In practice, English continues to be the preferred language of instruction, largely because it is widely associated with academic success, employment opportunities, and international engagement. This imbalance has created a noticeable gap between the intentions of language policy and what occurs in schools. Learners whose first language is Hausa are often introduced to academic content through English at an early stage, a practice that may hinder effective literacy acquisition, reduce classroom participation, and affect overall learning outcomes. At the same time, the limited use of Hausa in formal education weakens ongoing efforts to preserve indigenous languages and promote culturally

responsive teaching. Given these concerns, it is important to examine the position of Hausa within Nigeria's multilingual education system and evaluate the extent to which existing language policies support its development and educational use. Such an assessment can provide valuable insights into the factors influencing policy implementation and identify practical strategies for strengthening Hausa language education in Nigerian schools.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this paper is to examine the role of language policy in promoting Hausa within Nigeria's multilingual educational system. Specifically, the study seeks to:

i. Analyse the language policy framework that guides multilingual education in Nigeria.
ii. Evaluate the position and role of Hausa within the country's formal education system.
iii. Investigate the major factors limiting the effective implementation of Hausa language education.
iv. Examine the prospects for expanding the teaching and learning of Hausa in multilingual educational settings.
v. Propose practical measures for enhancing indigenous language education and strengthening the use of Hausa in Nigeria and other multilingual African societies.
vi. This study is guided by two complementary theoretical perspectives:

Theoretical Frame Work

Cummins' Interdependence Theory and **Ruiz's Language Planning Orientation Theory.** This study is guided by Cummins' Interdependence Theory and Ruiz's Language Planning Orientation Theory. Together, these theories explain how language policy and institutional support shape the educational use of Hausa in Nigeria's multilingual education system. Cummins' Interdependence Theory holds that knowledge and literacy developed in a learner's first language can transfer to additional languages when adequate instructional support is provided. Applied to this study, the theory explains why the use of Hausa as a medium of instruction, particularly in early schooling, can strengthen comprehension and literacy while supporting later learning in English. It therefore links the availability of Hausa-based instruction to learning-related outcomes.

Ruiz's Language Planning Orientation Theory views language as a resource rather than a problem and emphasises policies that recognise linguistic diversity as an educational asset. In this study, the theory explains how policy implementation, teacher preparation, funding, curricula, and instructional materials can either enable or restrict the use of Hausa in schools. Taken together, the theories position language-policy implementation and institutional support as the explanatory factors and the educational use of Hausa as the outcome. They provide a framework for examining whether policies that treat Hausa as a resource and support mother-tongue instruction can expand Hausa teaching and learning, strengthen educational inclusion, and preserve linguistic and cultural heritage. Together, these theoretical perspectives support the argument that indigenous languages, including Hausa,

should be regarded as valuable educational resources. They emphasize that effective language policies which promote mother-tongue instruction can enhance learners' academic achievement while simultaneously preserving linguistic and cultural heritage. Consequently, the theories provide an appropriate conceptual foundation for analysing the role of Hausa in Nigeria's multilingual education system and evaluating policies designed to strengthen indigenous language education.

Review of Related Literature

Multilingual Education in Africa

The importance of multilingual education has received increasing attention in African educational research over the past decade. Scholars and international organizations have emphasized that the use of learners' first languages during the early years of schooling contributes significantly to improved educational outcomes. According to UNESCO (2023), children who begin their education in languages they already understand are more likely to develop literacy skills, remain in school, and participate actively in the learning process. Benson (2022) similarly argues that literacy acquisition is strengthened when instruction is delivered through familiar languages, as learners are able to connect new knowledge with their existing linguistic and cultural experiences. Expanding this argument, Ouane and Glanz (2023) maintain that indigenous African languages should be recognized as valuable educational resources capable of supporting effective teaching, social inclusion, and sustainable national development. Rather than viewing multilingualism as a challenge, they advocate educational systems that accommodate linguistic diversity and promote the use of local languages alongside international languages.

Hausa Language and Educational Development

Among Nigeria's indigenous languages, Hausa occupies a prominent position because of its extensive use in education, literature, religion, commerce, and mass communication. The language has a long history of written and oral scholarship that predates colonial administration and continues to shape intellectual and cultural life in Northern Nigeria. Garba (2022) notes that Hausa has made significant contributions to literary production, religious education, and knowledge transmission, making it one of the most developed indigenous languages in the region. Recent technological innovations have further expanded opportunities for the growth of Hausa. The emergence of digital dictionaries, online learning platforms, machine translation tools, speech-processing technologies, and artificial intelligence applications has increased access to Hausa language resources for learners, teachers, and researchers. Adelani et al. (2024) observe that these digital developments are creating new possibilities for language preservation, academic research, and wider educational use.

Challenges Facing Indigenous Language Education

Despite growing recognition of the educational value of indigenous languages, several obstacles continue to limit their effective integration into formal education. Existing studies identify inadequate financial support, shortages of professionally trained language teachers,

insufficient teaching materials, and weak implementation of language policies as persistent challenges affecting indigenous language programmes in Nigeria (Bamgbose, 2021; Hazzan, 2024). In addition to institutional constraints, social attitudes also influence language policy implementation. Many parents associate English-medium education with better employment prospects, higher social status, and greater access to international opportunities. As a result, preference for English often outweighs support for mother-tongue instruction, reducing the practical use of indigenous languages such as Hausa within schools (Benson, 2022).

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive approach based on documentary analysis. Rather than collecting primary data, the research examined published materials relating to language policy, multilingual education, and Hausa language development. The sources consulted included peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, government policy documents, conference papers, reports from international organizations, and materials retrieved from reputable academic databases. Particular attention was given to literature published between 2021 and 2025 to ensure that the review reflected recent developments in the field. Documentary analysis was selected because it provides an effective means of examining policy documents, educational practices, and scholarly evidence without the need for fieldwork. The collected materials were analysed through content analysis, during which recurring themes relating to language planning, policy implementation, teacher preparation, instructional resources, language status, and educational challenges were identified and critically interpreted. The analysis also considered key policy documents, including the *National Policy on Education* (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013), UNESCO publications on multilingual education, and contemporary studies addressing indigenous language development in Nigeria. Evidence obtained from these sources was synthesized to evaluate the position of Hausa within the country's education system and to identify practical measures for strengthening language policy implementation.

Findings and Discussion

The review of relevant literature revealed several important issues concerning the development and educational use of Hausa within Nigeria's multilingual environment.

Hausa Maintains a Strong Sociolinguistic Position

Evidence from the reviewed literature indicates that Hausa remains one of the most widely spoken and influential indigenous languages in Africa. In addition to being the mother tongue of millions of people, it serves as a common language for communication across Northern Nigeria and neighbouring countries such as Niger, Ghana, Cameroon, Chad, and Sudan (Ethnologue, 2024). Its continued use in broadcasting, trade, religious activities, literature, and political communication demonstrates its importance beyond everyday conversation. This broad acceptance provides a favourable foundation for expanding the role of Hausa in formal education. Studies consistently show that learners understand concepts more effectively and achieve stronger academic outcomes when classroom instruction is provided in a language with which they are already familiar (UNESCO, 2023).

Policy Provisions Have Not Been Fully Implemented

The literature confirms that Nigeria's educational policies recognize the importance of indigenous languages by recommending the use of learners' mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment during the early years of schooling (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). Nevertheless, the practical application of these provisions remains inconsistent across many states and educational institutions. Several researchers report that English continues to dominate teaching, classroom interaction, examinations, and official school activities, even where policies recommend greater use of indigenous languages (Hazzan, 2024). Consequently, a significant gap persists between policy expectations and educational practice.

Limited Educational Resources Constrain Hausa Language Instruction

Another recurring finding concerns the shortage of resources needed to support effective Hausa language education. Many schools experience a shortage of qualified Hausa language teachers, while textbooks, reference materials, digital resources, and other instructional aids remain inadequate. These deficiencies reduce the quality and consistency of language instruction. Bamgbose (2021) attributes many of these challenges to insufficient funding and limited institutional commitment toward indigenous language programmes. Without sustained investment, policy objectives are unlikely to translate into meaningful classroom practice.

Digital Technology Creates New Opportunities

Advances in educational technology have introduced promising opportunities for strengthening Hausa language education. Digital dictionaries, online learning environments, speech recognition software, machine translation systems, and artificial intelligence applications are increasingly available to support teaching, learning, and linguistic research (Adelani et al., 2024). These technological innovations have the potential to improve access to learning materials, encourage independent study, preserve linguistic resources, and expand the presence of Hausa in digital and academic environments.

Educational Implications

The findings suggest several implications for educational development within multilingual African societies. Expanding mother-tongue-based instruction has the potential to improve literacy acquisition, enhance comprehension, and strengthen overall academic performance among learners in the early years of schooling. At the same time, greater use of Hausa within education contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage and reinforces learners' linguistic and cultural identity. Increasing the presence of Hausa in schools can also promote educational inclusion by making instruction more accessible to children from Hausa-speaking communities. Such efforts support the objectives of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which advocates inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education for all learners (United Nations, 2024). Overall, the reviewed literature indicates that indigenous languages should be regarded as valuable assets for educational and national development rather than obstacles to modernization. This position reflects the principles of Ruiz's (1984)

Language Planning Orientation Theory and reinforces the need for policies that recognize linguistic diversity as a strength within multilingual societies.

Conclusion

This study examined how language policy influences the status and educational use of Hausa in Nigeria's multilingual education system. It found that, despite Hausa's strong sociolinguistic position, cultural relevance, and growing digital potential, its use in formal education remains constrained by inconsistent policy implementation, the continued dominance of English, shortages of qualified teachers and instructional materials, and inadequate institutional support. The study contributes to knowledge by demonstrating that Hausa should be understood as an educational resource capable of supporting literacy, inclusion, and cultural preservation rather than as a barrier to national development. Its findings underscore the need for education authorities to implement mother-tongue policy provisions more consistently, strengthen teacher preparation, expand print and digital Hausa learning resources, and integrate Hausa more effectively into school curricula. Because the study is based on documentary analysis, future research should examine classroom practices, learner outcomes, and stakeholder attitudes across different regions of Nigeria. Strengthening Hausa language education is therefore essential to building a more inclusive, culturally responsive, and effective multilingual education system.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

i. Government agencies should strengthen the implementation of language policies that support mother-tongue education.
ii. Greater financial investment should be allocated to the development of Hausa language instructional materials.
iii. Teacher-training institutions should expand programmes for preparing qualified Hausa language teachers.
iv. Educational authorities should integrate Hausa language instruction more effectively into primary and secondary school curricula.
v. Universities should promote research in Hausa language studies, language technology, and indigenous language development.
vi. Digital platforms, mobile applications, and artificial intelligence technologies should be utilized to support Hausa language learning.
vii. Public awareness campaigns should be conducted to encourage positive attitudes toward indigenous language education.
viii. Regional cooperation among West African countries should be strengthened to promote Hausa as a language of education, communication, and cultural exchange.

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