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Mother-Tongue Instruction and Early Literacy Development in Nigerian Early Childhood Education: A Review of Policy and Practice

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Abstract

The choice of language in the early years of schooling shapes children's opportunities to understand lessons, participate in classroom activities and develop literacy. The present paper will discuss the evidence in Nigeria on mother-tongue instruction and early literacy in the community of Yoruba speakers in Oyo State. It is qualitative in nature, library based and utilizes language-in-education policies, theories of language development, Ife Six-Year Primary Project and selected Nigerian and African studies. The literature suggests a clear pedagogical reason for teaching with familiar languages, with some evidence from Nigeria, but not consistent. The difference between outcomes of learning in home language and outcomes in school with different modes of instruction has received recent attention. The unevenness in the implementation of the provisions of earlier policy can be attributed to teacher preparation, appropriate reading materials, and parental expectations and linguistic diversity. The Federal Government's decision to end the former early primary mother-tongue-medium requirement is also taken into account for the review. It concludes that language choice needs to be taken into account in conjunction with the quality of instruction and children's language proficiency, and suggests that teachers can be supported, that materials used in the classroom should be locally appropriate, and that parent engagement and additional research in the classroom should be encouraged.

Keywords: early childhood education, mother-tongue instruction, early literacy, language-in-education policy, Yoruba, Nigeria

Introduction

The language a child understands is closely connected to the language through which that child first learns to read. Before pupils can discuss a story, recognise the meaning of words in print or explain what they have understood, they need opportunities to use language meaningfully. The choice of instructional language is therefore more than a matter of school administration. It shapes access to learning, classroom participation and, potentially, children's confidence as emerging readers. In multilingual Nigeria, these questions are complicated by the status of

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English in education and employment and by the continued importance of indigenous languages in everyday life (Bamgbose, 1991; Adegbija, 2004).

Nigeria's education policies for several decades have recognised the importance of familiar language teaching. The National Policy on Education (NPE) 2009 recommended the mother tongue or immediate community language as the main medium of education in early childhood education. It also gave space to the language of the immediate environment in primary schools in the first three grades, and the course of gradually introducing English in primary 4 (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). The National Language Policy of 2022 further provided that instruction in mother-tongue/community-language would be conducted during the six years of primary school (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2022). Both documents referenced language choice and the broader goal of increasing access to meaningful learning.

Subsequent policy developments have occurred. The Federal Government in November 2025 made the decision to discontinue the NERDC mother-tongue-medium requirement for Primary 1–3 and to confirm that English shall be used as the medium of instruction from Primary education onwards (Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation [FMINO], 2025). This change in policy context changes the policy context in which the earlier studies should be read. It does not, however, provide an answer to the question of education; how children learn when the language they are taught in school is not the language they know best. The announcement does not completely clear up all the problems of the separate early childhood education stage.

Evidence from Nigeria is important, but not conclusive. There is a sustained Yoruba medium programme, which could be run in the school by curriculum development, teaching materials and teacher preparation, as exhibited in the Ife Six-Year Primary Project (Fafunwa et al., 1989). Studies that explored the practical challenges of MT teaching in varying contexts in Nigeria have followed. Perhaps most important is recent research that shows that simplistic beliefs that the teaching of indigenous language is invariably correlated with measured literacy gains are flawed (Obiakor, 2024). This tension requires consideration of the quality of teaching, the language pupils actually use and the evidence, not just language choice.

In the light of this, the paper examines the theory on mother-tongue teaching and early literacy as well as the evidence for mother-tongue teaching in Nigeria. It centres on the link between policy intentions and school experiences, and the context in which familiar-language education might be successful. The state of Oyo is the main context used for the implications drawn from the study because Yoruba language is widely spoken in the state and its written tradition is

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established. The analysis is based on published and documentary works, not based on the new fieldwork done in Oyo State.

Statement of the Problem

One of the challenges that have faced basic education in Nigeria is the gap between the language in policy and the language in the classroom. It is not just English that they favour. Schools vary in the languages spoken by their students, in the resources available to them and in the training that they receive in early reading. Other research on attitudes of student teachers and parents also indicates that, while mothers' desire for mother-tongue education in theory does not necessarily lead to their readiness or ability to provide it in practice (Ejieh, 2004; Iyamu & Ogiegbaen, 2007). These challenges present a practical question: what are the conditions for teaching with a familiar language to facilitate rather than simply meet a policy mandate for literacy?

The matter is now more complicated due to the previous national policy on the medium of instruction in primary school which was annulled by the announcement in November 2025. Meanwhile, results from Nigerian studies remain inconclusive. The findings of this study, together with those of the historical Ife project and subsequent evaluation of existing school practices, indicate the need to differentiate well established mother tongue programmes from the irregular use of indigenous languages in normal classrooms (Fafunwa et al., 1989; Obiakor, 2024). A critical reading of these various forms of evidence will be particularly helpful for the state of Oyo, where Yoruba may be known by many, but not all pupils. It also supports the identification of policies to safeguard early literacy in evolving policy contexts.

Purpose of the Study

The study is a review of the literature for the theoretical, empirical and policy literature on mother tongue instruction and early literacy development in Nigeria. It reviews the history of implementation, looks at the reasons for the challenges and explores the implications for early childhood and lower-primary education in Oyo State, including those of the policy announced in November 2025.

Research Questions

1. What theoretical and empirical evidence explains the relationship between familiar-language instruction and early literacy development?
2. What does the Ife Six-Year Primary Project, together with comparative African literature, reveal about the possibilities and conditions of mother-tongue-based education?

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3. What explains the gap between policy and classroom practice in Nigeria, and how might early literacy be supported in Oyo State under the changing policy framework?

Theoretical Framework

Cummins' (1981) linguistic interdependence hypothesis provides a starting point. It suggests that when learners are given enough opportunity to build up the second language, some of the language-related knowledge and academic skills acquired in the first language can be transferred to the second language. Such a child, for instance, who knows how stories are structured in Yoruba would not have to learn the concept of narrative sequence in the English language. The child will still have to acquire English vocabulary, patterns and rules in writing. The hypothesis, thus, suggests a reason for expecting some transfer from the one language to the other, but not immediate or complete.

The sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978) is useful in understanding the importance of instructional interaction. Children learn from experiences which allow adults and other more knowledgeable children to help them develop their understanding. It is a process in which discussion, questioning and explanation play a key role. However, if the language in these exchanges is not understood by the learners, they may have fewer opportunities to participate. On the other hand, teachers who are able to tap into children's familiar language tools may be better equipped to deduce what children are comprehending and to build upon their understanding. Such support can still be useful if what is taught and how the teacher structures the learning experiences.

Bruner (1983) gives further attention to the routines children can see adults engage in to help children develop language. Young learners are given opportunities to link words with experiences and to engage in more complex forms of communication through stories, play and repeated conversations. Shared reading, storytelling and talk about print can be used for similar purposes in a literacy classroom. These views taken together tell us why a familiar linguistic approach might help the learner to grasp the meaning initially, and allow for careful and thoughtful instruction of English. They give a conceptual framework in which to analyse the empirical studies, not to say that any medium of instruction is always effective in all settings.

Materials and Methods

A descriptive-analytical design using a qualitative and library-based approach was used to review policy documents, theory and published research regarding the language of instruction and early literacy. The objective was to explore the relationship between evidence and policy arguments for the Nigerian context and not to estimate an overall intervention effect. The study

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is a critical narrative review: The original research record does not include a systematic search of a database and formal screening process, so systematic-review claims would not be appropriate.

There are three sets of materials. Policy documents comprise of National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013), National Language Policy (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2022) and policy announcement (FMINO, 2025) for the official opening of the policy in November 2025. Theoretical sources are Cummins (1981), Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1983). The Ife project (Fafunwa et al., 1989), the field report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2022) and Obiakor (2024) covers empirical and policy studies in Nigeria, while studies by Bamgbose (1991), Adegbija (2004), Benson (2004), Ball (2011), Heugh (2011), and Trudell (2016) provide a wider context.

Materials were chosen because of their relevance to early literacy, classroom language practices, bilingualism policies or implementation in Nigeria and similar African contexts. To help clarify the explanatory framework, foundational theoretical works were included, and official documents were used for the policy positions expressed on the dates of publication. The empirical research was examined, taking into account the designs, settings and results that were reported. The selection was purposive and therefore the review is not comprehensive.

Close reading and comparison was used to structure the material around themes, following the general approach to qualitative analysis that Miles and Hubeman (1994) proposed. The themes for the presentation were: the role of familiar language instruction in early literacy; Nigerian evidence of learning outcomes and comparative evidence; barriers to the implementation; and implications for policy change. Care was taken to make sure the results of a planned learning intervention are not confused with associations found in observation data. Implications were drawn from studies where findings varied only after taking into account the method and institutional contexts of the studies.

Documentary and theoretical/empirical evidence is the basis of confidence in the synthesis. Published studies offer evidence on teaching practice and outcomes in the settings studied, while policy texts tell of what the authorities prescribed at certain times. The review acknowledges the message limitations of historical parallelism, survey-based connections and evidence not from within Oyo State. A sample of people was not recruited for this review. Substantive claims from literature are supported by references.

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Results

Language, Comprehension and Early Literacy Development

This theoretical justification for beginning reading instruction in a language that the learner can comprehend is based on the relationship between oral meaning and written language. Cummins (1981) claims that some knowledge and skills in literacy may be factors that facilitate L2 learning. For instance, a child who can tell a story in Yoruba would have a grasp of sequencing, character and cause, even if he knows very little English to speak about them. The instructional task is thus twofold: to develop on concepts that the children can express and to teach the vocabulary and conventions of writing in the new language. One method of supporting this process is the use of familiar-language instruction; however, its effectiveness is related to the quality and continuity of the instruction.

Vygotsky's (1978) and Bruner's (1983) interactional approach adds to this description. When children are able to participate in shared reading, oral storytelling and teacher-led discussion, they learn best. Ball (2011) and UNESCO (2003) similarly recognise the importance of children's existing language resources in early education. But knowing the language does not guarantee that someone will not have challenges learning to read print and the home language may be other than the standard written language used at school. The difference could make a difference in Nigeria, where pupils could learn spoken Yoruba without being able to read it or read books in Yoruba.

The Ife Six-Year Primary Project: Nigerian Historical Evidence

The Ife Six-Year Primary Project is a landmark in the research work in Nigeria on the medium of instruction. The project started in the 1970s, looked into Yoruba in primary schools, and focused on teacher training, school-level subject-specific curriculum and resources for the schools involved (Fafunwa et al., 1989). Bamgbose (1984) found that pupils taught in Yoruba for six years performed better academically than comparison pupils who were switched to English-medium after three years in the study. The results of these studies called into question the belief that extending first-language instruction would inevitably detract from achievement. They also illustrate how the medium of instruction was but one factor of the programme that was deliberately organised.

The findings align well with Cummins's linguistic interdependence hypothesis that suggests that the development of concepts and literacy in Yoruba doesn't need to hinder later development in English. However, the Ife project has focused on primary education and not on

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the day-to-day activity of today's pre-school centres. The achievement of its students cannot be explained solely in terms of the language taught but needs to take account of the way the programme is organised, teacher training and learning materials. The project's legacy is both didactic and institutional: the results demonstrate the pedagogical value – and the resources needed – to maintain a carefully supported programme in Yoruba.

Contemporary Nigerian Evidence and Contrasting Findings

The picture is not so consistent though in more recent studies from Nigeria, apart from the Ife study. UNICEF (2022) Phase II report was based on the information gathered during interviews, classroom observations among others in eight States of the Federal Republic, with the South-West region represented by Osun State. It highlighted diverse approaches to instruction, weaknesses in early reading provision and problems as students' progress into English-medium instruction before they are prepared. The report is useful for gaining insight into real classroom situations, but the evidence from observations and the stakeholders should not be used as a controlled comparison of languages.

Using the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) data from 2020–2021, the nationally representative samples of pupils were analysed for literacy performance, comparing those taught in indigenous languages with those taught in English, and Obiakor (2024) found that pupils instructed in indigenous language performed less on literacy than those in English. In contrast, a match between home language and language of instruction was correlated with a small literacy benefit. The association with the home language was predominantly with the English language for most of the matches in the survey, and therefore should not be used as a direct measure of the impact of teaching in the home language, Yoruba. The results go against the unqualified arguments of superiority for either language of instruction. It is also possible that the design of this study is cross-sectional and therefore that there are unmeasured differences in school quality and in family circumstances, and that the category 'indigenous language' does not always indicate that the pupils were schooled in their first language. The Nigerian studies together indicate that the language used, the language that the children know, and the quality of teaching should be studied independently.

Comparative African Evidence and Conditions for Success

Evidence from other parts of Africa should be interpreted with great caution and is broadly applicable. Benson (2004) highlights the importance of the role of mother-tongue based schooling for access and participation, while Heugh (2011) explains the role that the timing of the transition to an additional language of instruction can play in learning. One of the recurring

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issues in these reports is the expectation that children may be expected to acquire challenging material in a subject area in a language that they are not fluent in. However, where teacher expertise, learning materials and/or continued support is not available in schools, the results of well-resourced programmes can be assumed.

In Eastern and Southern Africa, Trudell (2016) records differences between language policies and classroom practices, while Ouane and Glanz (2011) place their issues in the broader context of curriculum, publishing and financing. Their analyses aid in the understanding of why it is not enough just to identify an instructional language. They also highlight a crucial constraint on the cross-country comparisons: children's language spoken and the nature of schooling and teacher training differ significantly. African evidence is therefore most useful to the degree it can be used to describe the conditions of successful instruction, rather than to the degree that it becomes an argument that a single model will work anywhere.

Structural Barriers in Nigeria

These constraints are concretised in Nigerian studies. In a questionnaire study conducted with 106 student teachers of a college of education, Ejieh (2004) generally found negative attitudes towards mother-tongue instruction. Iyamu and Ogiegbaen (2007), in a larger questionnaire study, found that a number of parents and teachers were aware of its benefits but parents were not too enthusiastic about it being the instructional medium of their children. From their research it is concluded that the value attached to English can make the provision of support for indigenous-language schools more complex, even where the educational argument is recognised. Issues such as teacher training and lack of graded materials and assessment materials pose further challenges, especially in schools where these resources are not available (Adegbija, 2004; UNICEF, 2022).

The constraints interact. However, teachers can use English language textbooks even if the lesson is being taught in a local language, and pupils in a multilingual classroom do not necessarily have the same target language of instruction. The UNICEF (2022) study identifies challenges of sudden switch to English, inconsistencies in language-supportive classroom practices, and the uneven distribution of reading materials. The observations warn against the view that Oyo State is linguistically homogenous because of the fact that Yoruba is widely spoken there. This is a question that needs to be asked of individual schools: Do children know the language used for teaching, can teachers use it effectively, and is there suitable reading instruction provided?

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The November 2025 Policy Shift

In 2013, the National Policy on Education (NPE) and the National Language Policy of 2022 provided for the teaching of the mother-tongue or immediate-community-language, but in varying extents and times (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013, 2022). The Federal Government in November 2025 announced that it eliminated the NERDC requirement for mother-tongue instruction in Primary 1–3 and that English would be the medium of instruction for Primary to tertiary education (FMINO, 2025). The announcement highlighted the practical considerations around linguistic diversity, teacher capacity and learning resources. These are reasons that should be provided as the government's justification for its decision, and should not be treated as independent support for the view that the instructional language yields better learning outcomes.

This announcement carries immediate ramifications for the manner of recommendations. It is not a matter of requiring that schools teach everything in Yoruba while children's home language knowledge is strengthened; it is about strengthening the use of children's home language knowledge in teaching. There has to be a degree of caution, however, in the scope of the revised policy for early childhood education with the official statement explicitly identifying primary education onwards. Before one can say that its practices have already changed in a specific direction, evidence of implementation at school level is not available to make the claim.

Discussion

Interpreting the Evidence–Policy Relationship

When considering the merits of familiar-language instruction and the difficulties of its implementation in the classroom, the literature indicates that these two issues should be dealt with simultaneously. The Ife project provides evidence from a planned intervention, while the following surveys and policy studies provide evidence of what occurs under less controlled school conditions. Both types of evidence should not be considered independently. A programme may have educational potential but have no impact if the teachers' training is inadequate or the pupils do not have an understanding of the language used. On the other hand, if there appears to be a relationship between English medium education and English literacy, this does not imply that the difference in literacy results was caused by English itself (Obiakor, 2024).

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Implications for Oyo State and Yoruba-Language Pedagogy

It is not just a question of whether or not Yoruba or English is to be on a school timetable for Oyo State. There is a rich linguistic and literary legacy of Yoruba which can be used to teach children, but there are variations in pupil population and teacher capability. In spite of English being the prescribed language for instruction, teachers should determine if their students grasp important concepts and implement effective strategies for oral explanation and language scaffolding as well as explicit literacy instruction. The historical Ife experience has shown that changes in the medium of instruction are best effected by curriculum planning and the provision of appropriate materials and not by policy statements alone (Fafunwa et al., 1989).

Responding to Parental Expectations

It is understandable that parents prefer English, as in a society where the language can provide educational and occupational benefits. The study of Iyamu and Ogiegbaen (2007) is very revealing because it illustrates the fact that the benefits of mother-tongue learning were not enough to convince parents to opt for it for their children. Instead of responding to concerns as a resistance needing to be overcome, schools should demonstrate the nature of early reading instruction and how English proficiency is built, as well as how familiar-language understanding is integral to classroom instruction. This dialogue can be more believable if backed up by evidence of pupil progress.

Teacher Preparation, Materials and Inclusion

Practical response is focused on teacher preparation. There is a need for strategies that will help the teacher develop oral language, teach letter–sound relationships, and guide comprehension and support pupils who are not yet fluent in the language of the classroom. The UNICEF, (2022) study refers to the importance of language supportive pedagogy and the need for a language transition that is well managed. In a school where students are Yoruba speakers, this might include age appropriate Yoruba stories and oral activities as well as explicit instruction in the conventions of English vocabulary and print, as appropriate to the curriculum and policy. There is a need for support for children whose home language is not standard Yoruba or English.

Institutional Coordination and Evidence for Decision-Making

State education authorities, school leaders and teacher educators need to work in cooperation to address actual literacy needs. Some of the points that would be useful are: the languages pupils consider to be their own when they enter the school; the languages that the teachers use;

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and the availability of graded reading materials and the patterns of progress in comprehension and early reading. This would assist in determining if the problems are mainly due to unfamiliar words or lack of reading instruction or more general school issues. It would also give an adequate foundation for assessing the implications of the 2025 policy change, rather than the policy announcement.

Limitations

There are some caveats to note. Purpose sampling of literature was used and it is not a systematic screened body of literature. The historical Ife evaluation addresses different questions and the evidence from the more recent Nigerian evaluations is observationally based, which raises other questions and does not provide a single estimation of the effect of mother-tongue instruction. To the extent that it reflects measured differences between pupils, Obiakor's (2024) cross-sectional analysis is able to control for them, but it does not account for unseen factors influencing school selection and literacy outcomes. Most of the Nigerian evidence is of primary schools only and this review did not include any new observations in Oyo State. The impact of the 2025 policy change on education has yet to be tested.

Conclusion

The literature shows that children respond to teaching that they can comprehend and engage in; however it does not provide a blanket statement that any particular instructional language will consistently produce better literacy outcomes. This work, the Ife Six-Year Primary Project, shows the possibilities of a well-supported Yoruba-medium programme, and later Nigerian research highlights the difficulties of attitudes, resources, linguistic diversity and school conditions. The linguistic interdependence hypothesis of Cummins can account for the potential relationships between L1 and L2 learning, but not independent of the quality of L2 instruction.

Recommendations

The following recommendations arise from the evidence reviewed and recognise the need to work within applicable national and state arrangements:

1. **Improve teachers' preparation for early literacy instruction.** Teacher education institutions and the Oyo State Universal Basic Education Board should strengthen training in oral-language development, phonological awareness, shared reading, comprehension and support for children learning through an additional language. Practical classroom demonstrations should accompany theoretical instruction.

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2. **Provide reading materials that reflect pupils' language needs.** Education authorities and publishers should develop and evaluate age-appropriate Yoruba and bilingual storybooks, graded readers and teacher guides where these are compatible with applicable policy. English-language materials should be matched to children's vocabulary and reading levels.
3. **Engage parents through evidence and classroom practice.** Schools should explain how proficiency in Yoruba and English may support different aspects of learning and show parents examples of reading activities and pupils' progress. Communication should address legitimate concerns about future English proficiency without making unsupported promises.
4. **Recognise linguistic differences within schools.** At school entry, teachers should identify the languages children understand and adapt explanations, reading support and family engagement accordingly. This is particularly important where Yoruba is widely spoken but is not every child's home language.
5. **Coordinate resources and monitor literacy development.** State and local education authorities should align teacher preparation, curriculum guidance, materials distribution and assessment. Monitoring should attend to actual comprehension and reading development as well as compliance with formal requirements.
6. **Generate contemporary evidence from Oyo State.** Further studies should examine language practices and literacy outcomes in early childhood centres and lower-primary schools, ideally following pupils over time. The effects of the November 2025 policy change should be investigated rather than assumed.

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