A TEACHER, A TRANSLATOR OR BOTH? EXPLORING THE NEXUS OF TEACHER-TRAINING AND CLASSROOM PRACTICES IN THE NIGERIAN MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION SETTING

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Abstract

Nigeria as a multilingual nation adopted English language as a unifying code among all the linguistic nationalities in the country. This has increased the status of English to the extent of tying success in Nigeria to impeccable use of English. This is with its attendant consequence on many of the indigenous languages which have been decimated with its cultural and indigenous knowledge systems. To salvage the situation, the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) institutionalized the use of indigenous languages both as medium and as subjects at the Basic level of the Nigerian Education. Despite this effort, teachers have been observed to lack translation competence in the classroom. This paper, therefore, examines the link between the Nigerian teacher education curriculum and the actual classroom practices in relation to translation for effective mother-tongue medium education. This is done through an explorative anlaysis of the Nigerian teacher education curriculum and National language Policy. The Paper concludes that the Nigerian teacher education curriculum and the provisions of National Language Policy are not capable of breeding teachers who would double as translators, thereby defeating the important role of translation in the bilingual education policy. It is therefore suggested that concerted and collaborative efforts need to be put in place among relevant stakeholders whose suggestions would make L1 and L2 effectively functional in the classroom through deliberate teacher-education training with a robust translation framework that will make the teachers become not just instructors but also translators.

Keywords: Bilingualism, Biliteracy, Classroom Practices, Teacher Education, Translation, mother-tongue medium

Introduction

Nigeria's multilingual context presents profound challenges and opportunities for educational policy and practices in the classroom. With over 500 indigenous languages, the linguistic diversity of the nation does not only reflect rich cultural heritage but also creates complexity for educational planning, especially regarding language of education. Historically, English was institutionalised as the unifying language of education, especially at the level of instruction to bridge Nigeria's ethnolinguistic differences, a legacy that continues to shape educational outcomes. While English remains an important tool for national integration and access to global knowledge systems, its dominance has marginalised the indigenous languages and pushed many into extinction and eventual death, leading to erosion of cultural practices and indigenous knowledge systems.

To address these issues, the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) launched policy frameworks that recognise the importance of mother-tongues/indigenous languages in foundational education. The National Policy on Education (NPE, 2014) and the National Language Policy (NLP, 2023) emphasise the use of mother-tongue for instruction in early schooling, particularly in the first five years of schooling to promote biliteracy. However, policy prescriptions have not effectively translated into classroom realities. One notable area of lapses is in the teachers' lack of knowledge of the policy existence, preparation and competencies for implementing these bilingual/biliteracy policies, especially in translation competence—the ability to mediate meaning across languages in classroom interaction. This paper examines the interface between teacher education curricula and classroom practices in Nigeria's multilingual education settings, with a focus on teacher translation competence as a pivotal factor in language of education policy implementation.

The central argument is that Nigeria's teacher education curriculum and language policy provisions have failed to equip teachers with the necessary translational skills, undermining the functional implementation of mother-tongue and bilingual education policies. The paper proceeds in the following structure: theoretical underpinnings; language policy in Nigeria; teacher education and translation competence; classroom practices and anomalies; case study insights; and implications for policy reform and teacher training.

Bilingualism and Education

Bilingualism is both the umbrella name for multilingualism and a subset of it. It is a situation whereby two or more languages are routinely used by individuals or institutions at different competency levels. In education, bilingual medium often involves the use of more than one language for learning and instruction. Research in bilingual education emphasises cognitive and academic advantages when learners receive instruction in their first language alongside a second language (Ogunniran, 2021). Mother-tongue instruction at early ages supports cognitive development, literacy acquisition, and smoother transition to additional languages (Lawal & AbdulRahman, 2019)

In the Nigerian context, bilingual education acknowledges both indigenous languages and English, aiming to balance cultural preservation with national integration and global competition. The theoretical premise is that structured bilingual education can foster biliteracy and curriculum accessibility while preserving linguistic heritage (Oktarina, 2019). Yet the effectiveness of such models hinges on teacher capacities, instructional resources, and coherent policy implementation.

Translation Competence in Education Instruction

Translation competence in educational settings, especially regarding instruction refers to a teacher's ability to mediate meaning between languages in real-time classroom interaction. It goes beyond basic bilingual ability to include skills in interpreting instructional content, clarifying complex concepts across languages, and ensuring equitable access to curriculum knowledge for learners from diverse language backgrounds. In bilingual classrooms, teacher translational skills can serve as a bridge between learners' first language (L1) and second language (L2), enhancing comprehension and participation.

Translation is often overlooked in teacher education, especially in contexts where language policies emphasise bi or poly-linguistic medium of instruction but lack operational guidance on linguistic mediation. The absence of translation competence in teacher training curricula intensifies the policy–practice gap, leading to classroom practices that either revert to English or persist in ad hoc code-switching without pedagogical structure. It also leads to what Lawal (2025) refers to as mistranslation—a situation where there is a complete disconnect between what is said and the message it carries after translation.

National Policy on Education and National Language Policy in Nigeria

National Policy on Education

The National Policy on Education (NPE, 2014) has long recognised the role of language as part of Nigeria's educational framework. Historically, successive revisions of the NPE have mandated that children learn their mother tongue and English, with mother-tongue instruction envisaged in early primary classes. Specifically, the policy envisages that the language of the immediate environment be the medium of instruction in the early years of primary education, with English introduced as a subject and later as the medium of instruction. This is captured as: "every child shall be taught in the mother tongue or language of the immediate environment for the first four years of basic education….In addition, it is expected that every child shall learn one Nigerian language" (NPE, 2014, p. 4). Furthermore, another section of the policy (NPE, 2014), states that up to lower basic 3, "the medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the immediate environment for the first three years in monolingual communities. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject" (P. 11: Sec. D). The policy states further that, "From the fourth year, English shall be progressively used as a medium of instruction and the language of the immediate environment, French and Arabic shall be taught as subjects" (P 12: Sec. E). The expectation is that learners develop proficiency in both indigenous languages and English, leading to bilingual competence during schooling.

However, empirical assessments of policy outcomes indicate that this objective remains largely unmet (Ogunniran, 2021). Studies have documented that the goals of bilingual proficiency outlined in the NPE have not been achieved, with many learners failing to attain functional competence in their mother tongue and English to the expected levels. Teacher preparedness, instructional materials, and language curriculum design have been identified as significant challenges (AbdulRahman & Lawal, 2019).

National Language Policy

In 2022, the Federal Government of Nigeria introduced the National Language Policy (NLP), which seeks to further entrench the Mother-Tongue Based Bilingual Education into the formal education system. The NLP aims to reverse the dominance of English by institutionalising indigenous languages as media of instruction from early childhood through Primary Six, with English retained for later stages of education. It also emphasises the

developmental imperative of preserving indigenous languages and cultural heritage.

The NLP represents an important policy shift by recognising Nigeria's multilingual reality explicitly and attempting to create space for indigenous languages in formal education. Yet the success of the policy depends on practical considerations including teacher training quality, curriculum design, resource allocation, and sustained stakeholder support.

Teacher Education Curriculum and Translation Competence in Nigeria

Structure of Teacher Education in Nigeria

Teacher education in Nigeria encompasses pre-service and in-service training programmes offered by Colleges of Education, Universities, and Professional Development Institutes. These programmes prepare teachers to deliver curriculum content across subject areas and pedagogical competencies. Some of the courses offered include general methodology, general use of English, practicum and core subject area-related courses such as Mathematics, Social Studies, Political Science, Computer Studies among others. Critical assessment of the curriculum revealed that there is no provision for language medium of instruction as a course which should have been a general course for every student regardless of the individual student course of study which would have been a response towards preparing manpower for the implementation of language of education policy.

This implies that despite the multilingual mandate of the National Policy on Education and National Language Policy, teacher education curricula remain insufficient for translation skills, language planning, and bilingual pedagogy. Translation competence within the curricular remains unheard or at best operating at a peripheral, often reduced to basic use of two languages without pedagogical frameworks for its classroom application. As a result, many teacher graduates enter classrooms without critical skills needed to mediate instruction between mother tongue and English in structured, pedagogically sound ways. This is in addition to lack bilingual books to aid such instructional processes within the classroom.

Teacher Preparedness and Translation Competence

Research has shown that teachers often rely on code-switching practices that do not align with the established and structured bilingual education (AbdulRahman & Lawal, 2025). Translanguaging—fluid movement between languages—is practiced only informally which most times lacks pedagogical

intentionality, thereby negatively affecting content clarity and expected academic outcomes in classrooms where learners have diverse linguistic profiles.

Teacher training programmes in Nigeria have not kept pace with the demands of multilingual classrooms (AbdulRahman & Lawal, 2025). There is a lack of specialised courses that integrate translation pedagogy, bilingual curriculum design, language assessment strategies and all the required resources. Without robust translation frameworks in preparing teachers for actual classroom practices, educators remain unprepared to implement language policy effectively, undermining efforts to achieve biliteracy and cognitive development goals.

Teacher Education Challenges

According to Lawal (2022) there exists a disconnect between teacher education programmes and the linguistic demands of Nigeria's multilingual classrooms. According to Lawal, existing curricula prioritise standard pedagogical skills without sufficiently engaging with linguistic mediation, translation competence, and multilingual classroom management. Teachers are often ill-equipped or not equipped at all to balance instructional demands across languages, resulting in instructional practices that prioritise English at the expense of indigenous languages and learner comprehension (Lawal, 2022). This is more profound, especially when there are more private teacher training institutions than the government-owned. In a situation where government pays lip-service to the preparation of teachers, in addition to not providing instructional resources, especially multilingual textbooks for the proper implementation of the bilingual education policies, privately-owned institutions do not care at all. This is not only because the private institutions are in it for profit maximisation, but also government has consistently failed in its oversight functions over the private higher institutions (AbdulRahman & Lawal, 2025)

Classroom Practices and Policy Anomalies

Policy-Practice Gap

The disparities between language policy prescriptions and classroom realities are sufficiently scholarly referenced (AbdulRahman & Lawal, 2019; Ogunniran, 2021; Lawal, 2022). Despite policy frameworks advocating for mother-tongue and bilingual instruction, many classrooms remain dominated by English, even in early primary grades. This dominance stems from perceptions of English as the language of academic success and upward

mobility. Teachers, parents, and community stakeholders often prioritise English proficiency over indigenous language instruction, reinforcing the marginalisation of mother-tongue approaches. This policy-practice gap becomes grounded because the formulators of the policy who should lead by example by entrenching the policy implementation within the public school are negligent. Many public schools even punish both teachers and pupils at the lower classes for using the mother-tongue as means of communication, promoting a complete departure from the mother-tongue policy.

Compounding this issue are structural anomalies in policy implementation. Teacher training programmes lack mandatory bilingual education modules; instructional materials in indigenous languages are insufficient; the available mother-tongue textbooks are only for the languages as subject and not leveraging them to reflect a bilingual approach for teaching other subjects, particularly sciences and mathematics. Assessment systems remain aligned with English as the primary language of examination (AbdulRahman & Lawal, 2025). These factors collectively inhibit the practical realisation of multilingual policy goals.

Also, the linguistic nature of many of the Nigerian classrooms, the recruitment and posting practices of teacher managers are very inconsistent to say the least. The guidelines for posting teachers do not align with the linguistic realities of many classrooms. For instance, a Yoruba-speaking teacher being transferred to teach in a Nupe-speaking environment is a clear indication of what Lawal (2022) refers to as policy-practice-in-crisis. Such a teacher would be left with no choice than to simply teach in English without any ability to ensure effective understanding of what is taught through the deployment of the indigenous languages.

Code-Switching and Translanguaging in Practice

In many Nigerian classrooms, teachers resort to code-switching and translanguaging-an informal switching between languages-to facilitate comprehension. While these practices can support learner understanding, they are often unstructured and lack pedagogical intent, reducing their effectiveness. The absence of formal guidelines and teacher training in pedagogical translation means that language mediation becomes inconsistent and teacher-dependent which may eventually be counter-productive (Olagbaju, 2020).

Translanguaging as a strategy has shown promising outcomes in some contexts, improving learner engagement and facilitating comprehension across languages.

Case Evidence: Nigeria's Multilingual Education Challenges

Empirical Findings from Policy Implementation Studies

Studies on multilingual education in Nigeria reveal persistent implementation challenges. For example, studies by AbdulRahman and Lawal (2019), Ogunniran (2021) AbdulRahman and Lawal (2025) on bilingual education in pre-primary and lower primary schools found that teachers faced significant obstacles such as lack of materials, inadequate training, and negative attitudes toward indigenous languages in formal instruction. This has resulted in poor implementation of multilingual provisions of the NPE, especially in private schools where English dominance is more entrenched.

Similarly, longitudinal assessments of NPE outcomes indicate that its bilingual goals have not been achieved, with recommendations for intensive workshops and training programmes for language teachers to improve bilingual instruction (AbdulRahman & Lawal, 2025)

Policy Reversal and Recent Developments

Notably, recent reports suggest a major policy reversal where the Federal Government of Nigeria through its Minister of Education: Mr Tunji Alausa verbally cancelled the use of indigenous languages as mediums of instruction, reinstating English as the sole language of instruction across educational levels. While some argue this move reflects evidence-based governance focused on academic performance, critics contend it contradicts the NPE and undermines global evidence supporting mother-tongue education. The policy reversal as pronounced by the Minister highlights the fragility of multilingual education reforms in Nigeria and the susceptibility of language of education policy to political pressures and practical challenges. It further exposes contradictions in policy frameworks and raises questions on the sustainability of multilingual education efforts without strong political will on the part of the leaders towards robust teacher support systems.

Policy and Practice Implications

Teacher Training Reform

To bridge the teacher preparation gap, teacher education curricula must explicitly incorporate translation pedagogy and bilingual instructional

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strategies. Courses should equip pre-service and in-service teachers with competencies in planning lessons that integrate indigenous languages and English; managing multilingual classrooms; using translanguaging as a structured pedagogical tool; and designing assessments that reflect bilingual learning goals (Olagbaju, 2020). To achieve this, both in-service and pre-service teachers should become effective translators, having been trained to function as one. This implies that for effective implementation of the bilingual education policy in Nigeria, it is not enough to produce teacher but government must put a robust sytem n place to produce teacher-translators who would be able to maintain the fluidity required in interpreting concepts written in other languages while teaching the pupils in their L1.

Also, professional development programmes should offer sustained, practice-based training rather than one-off workshops. Collaborative partnerships between teacher training institutions, language experts, and educational policymakers can facilitate development of specialised modules and teaching resources, especially for in-service teachers in order to bring them up to speed on the required translation skills for the bilingual education policy implementation.

Curricular materials in indigenous languages must be systematically developed and distributed. Textbooks, teaching aids, and assessment tools that reflect multilingual objectives are essential. National curriculum frameworks should align with language policy goals, integrating mother-tongue instruction with English in sequenced progression.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the intricate relationship between teacher education, classroom practices, and multilingual education policy in Nigeria. Drawing on empirical and policy sources, it identified significant disjunctions between policy intent and classroom realities—particularly in teacher preparation and translation competence. While Nigeria's language policies recognise the value of multilingual education, existing teacher education curricula and implementation mechanisms are inadequate to deliver on these aspirations.

The evidence suggests that without deliberate and systemic reform—anchored on robust teacher training, curriculum development, and translation pedagogy—policy goals of biliteracy and inclusive education will remain a mere dream on a paper. Addressing these gaps requires collaboration among educational stakeholders, sustained political commitment, and investment in teacher capacities to transform Nigeria's multilingual education landscape.

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