

Indigenous Language and National Development: A Study of Lecturers Perception in Universities in North-Central, Nigeria

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Abstract: Language is a body and combination of words used by a nation, people or race for the communication process. Over the years, the quality of languages spoken by different individuals, most especially in the language instruction, is worrisome and the research therefore investigates how language lecturers perceived indigenous language as a tool of National Development in a North Central University, Nigeria. Specifically, the study sample investigates: a) how language lecturers in both faculties of arts and education perceived indigenous language as a tool of national development. It is descriptive research with all the 175 lecturers in both the five departments offering languages in the faculty of arts and education as the population for the study, while the target population was also 175 lecturers, while the study sample was 77 lecturers, who are purposively sampled. One research question was anchored and answered with the percentage, means and standard deviation which underwent reliability tests using the test-retest method and correlated using Pearson Correlation Coefficient with a value of 0.75 at 0.05 level of significance. The result shows that all the language lecturers perceived indigenous language as a tool for national development, among others. It was concluded that language is a tool of national development and recommended that the government should update lecturer's knowledge of language learning for national development.

Keywords: Indigenous Language, National Development, North Central, University, Nigeria.

Introduction

Language is a key not just for personal development but also for national development. It is a vehicle through which education takes place, while national development is an all-encompassing phenomenon that embraces all facets of human activity social, economic, political, and cultural. It is a process of raising real per capita income of a nation, evident

in the reduction of income inequalities and the advancement of the general populace. Adegbite and Ajayi (2021) described language as a culturally embedded system of expressing ideas and emotions. Yusuf and Obasa (2022) define language as a dynamic tool that shapes and is shaped by the social and cultural environment of its speakers. The theory of linguistic relativity also demonstrates the link between language and cognition, affirming that the structure of a language influences how its speakers perceive and think about the world (Ibrahim, Mustapha, Auta, Kaya and Joseph 2022). Oladejo (2020) emphasised that language is central to the identity and worldview of a people, serving not only as a communicative tool but also as a reflection of cultural heritage. This underscores how language enables individuals to articulate complex experiences, emotions, and social realities. Moreover, language plays a pivotal role in the performance of social roles and the formation of social relationships within any society (Usman & Bello, 2021). However, since the researcher is investigating the lectures perception on indigenous language as a tool for national development, there is need to review literature on indigenous language.

Indigenous language is one's native or mother tongue, the language first acquired during early childhood, typically within one's immediate environment. It forms the foundational medium for thought, communication, and cultural identity. Contemporary research consistently supports the view that indigenous languages are the most effective medium of instruction for young children, especially when used within the child's native linguistic environment. Studies have shown that children who begin their education in their mother tongue display higher levels of cognitive development, comprehension, and emotional stability (Okonkwo & Ahmed, 2021). This position has received strong backing from international educational bodies. For instance, UNESCO (2021) emphasises the critical role of mother-tongue instruction in fostering inclusive education and academic achievement. The organisation emphasised that denying children the opportunity to learn in their indigenous language can hinder both intellectual and emotional development.

Similarly, scholars such as Alamu and Ibrahim (2022) have argued that children are more likely to develop critical thinking, curiosity, and emotional resilience when taught in a language they understand deeply. According to them, indigenous languages serve as a cognitive base upon which the acquisition of second or foreign languages can be effectively built. A strong foundation in the mother tongue not only facilitates better understanding and internalization of educational concepts but also promotes continuity in thinking and cultural transmission (Usman & Etim, 2023). Language specialists have observed that the use of indigenous languages enhances learners' expressive abilities, intellectual engagement, and adaptability. When indigenous languages are used in school settings, there is a closer alignment between home and school environments, which reinforces learning on both fronts (Okon & Angela, 2023). Despite this, many Nigerian

parents demonstrate a strong preference for English over indigenous languages, often believing that fluency in English is the key to academic and social success. As a result, some parents raise their children to be monolingual in English, both at home and in school (Ojo& Ibrahim, 2022).

Historically, English entered Nigeria's school curriculum during the mid-19th century with the arrival of Christian missionaries who introduced Western formal education. The first primary school, established in Badagry, aimed to equip converts with the ability to read the Bible, sing hymns, and recite catechism in English. Over time, English gained dominance in the school system and eventually became Nigeria's official language and lingua franca (Usman & Oladele, 2021). Today, English remains one of the most important subjects in Nigeria's education system. It is considered a core subject at all levels pre-primary, primary, and beyond and becomes the primary medium of instruction from Primary Four upward. While its global relevance is undeniable, English also plays a crucial national role by serving as a unifying medium in a multilingual country like Nigeria (Adelabu & Musa, 2023). However, experts argue that this emphasis on English should not come at the expense of indigenous languages. Balanced bilingualism is critical for national development, as it enables cultural preservation alongside global competence.

Also, the birth of the National Policy on Education (NPE) emerged shortly after Nigeria's attainment of political independence. According to Olaniyan and Danlami (2021), there have been long calls in the Nigerian legislature for English to be replaced by indigenous languages as the official medium of communication. These calls stemmed from concerns over the widespread difficulty many Nigerians face in understanding and using English effectively. As noted by Eze and Mohammed (2022), some scholars and policymakers have argued for strengthening the teaching and adoption of major indigenous languages to enhance national unity and accessibility in governance and business transactions.

Despite Nigeria's National Policy on Education recommending indigenous languages as the medium of instruction in the early years of schooling, many nursery and primary schools across the country continue to use English as the dominant language of teaching and learning. This disconnects between policy and practice reflects parental preference, societal bias, and systemic challenges such as inadequate teaching materials and poorly trained teachers in indigenous languages (Udo & Ogunbiyi, 2023). Scholars like Okonkwo and Adeyemi (2020) argue that effective implementation of language-in-education policies must include comprehensive teacher training, curriculum reform, and public reorientation towards valuing indigenous languages in formal education. These perspectives significantly influenced a change in government attitude particularly at the federal level toward indigenous language use in national life. Okonkwo and Bello (2023) observed that this shift was partly driven by a growing acknowledgment among

policymakers of what linguists and anthropologists had long emphasized: language serves not only as a medium of communication but also as a carrier of cultural values, identity, and indigenous knowledge systems. Beyond acknowledging the cultural link, the government began to regard indigenous languages as viable and practical tools for inclusive national development (Adejumo&Olayemi, 2020).

This ideological transformation was codified in the Federal Republic of Nigeria's National Policy on Education (NPE) first published in 1977 and revised in 1981, 2004, and most recently in 2013. The policy mandates the teaching and learning of multiple languages at different educational levels. At the primary school level (six years), each child is required to study two languages: (1) the mother tongue or a widely spoken indigenous language in the area of residence, and (2) English. At the junior secondary level (three years), students are to study three languages: (1) the mother tongue or a language of wider communication, (2) one of the three major Nigerian languages Hausa, Igbo, or Yoruba (distinct from the mother tongue), and (3) English. At the senior secondary level (three years), the curriculum requires the study of two languages: an indigenous language and English. French and Arabic are also offered as optional subjects at both junior and senior levels (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). It is, therefore, imperative that indigenous languages be given a prestigious and functional role within Nigeria's educational system to promote national identity. Nigeria, as a nation-state, consists of multiple ethnic groups, each with its distinct indigenous language. While, in theory, every indigenous language qualifies to be taught as a school subject under the National Policy on Education (NPE), practical implementation remains a challenge due to the relatively small number of speakers for most of these languages. According to Okeke and Salami (2021), although the NPE promotes mother-tongue instruction at the primary and junior secondary levels, logistical challenges and lack of instructional materials hinder the inclusion of many minority languages in school curricula. The Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), through its Language Development Centre (LDC), has advocated for the inclusion of not only the three major indigenous languages, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba but also other widely spoken regional languages such as Edo, Fulfulde, Ibibio, Idoma, Ijo, Kanuri, Nupe, and Tiv in the formal school system (Adejoh&Abubakar, 2023). Since the second variable of this research work is national development, literature is also reviewed on it.

Nation-building is often conceptualized using architectural metaphors. As described by Akinyemi and Balogun (2022), it involves deliberate actions by state actors-leaders, policymakers, and cultural advocates as well as organic, unplanned societal transformations that shape national cohesion. Political scientists view nation-building as a fundamental tool, akin to how industrialization functions in economic sociology. According to Musa and Onwumere (2020), the concept provides an analytical framework

for understanding the political, cultural, and structural evolution of the modern Nigerian state. Language plays a central role in this process, serving as a unifying force and a repository of collective memory and identity.

The preceding discussion highlights that in multi-ethnic societies like Nigeria, the drive toward social integration and nation-building has often emanated from state institutions. This has been pursued through various means such as material incentives financial support, public service employment, and economic opportunities as well as cultural strategies including language policy, educational reforms, and religious integration (Ogunyemi & Ibrahim, 2022). Language, therefore, plays an indispensable role in facilitating nation-building, serving not only as a tool of communication but also as a vehicle for identity, unity, and political mobilization (Afolayan & Musa, 2021). However, significant challenges exist in utilizing language education effectively for nation-building in Nigeria. One major issue is the disconnection between language policy and practice particularly concerning the language of instruction in schools. Although many African states, including Nigeria, have advocated for the use of indigenous languages in early education, English continues to dominate as the primary language of instruction at all levels (Nwachukwu & Adebayo, 2023). Ideally, the language of instruction should promote functional multilingualism, empowering learners to become proficient in both indigenous and international languages. Functional multilingualism not only fosters inclusion but also preserves linguistic heritage and enhances national unity (Oyetade & Danjuma, 2020). It is also crucial to distinguish between language of instruction and language instruction. The former refers to the medium used to teach all school subjects (e.g., English, Arabic, or Yoruba), while the latter refers to the teaching of language as a subject (e.g., English Language as a subject). The debate on the appropriate language of instruction in Nigeria should be centered on balancing global competitiveness with cultural preservation through multilingual approaches.

Moreover, language is power. It is not merely a medium of exchange but a determinant of access to social mobility, participation, and influence. Studies have shown that individuals with strong foundational knowledge in their mother tongue often perform better when learning a second language like English. This foundational strength enhances cognitive transfer and facilitates higher academic achievement and social integration (Chikere & Lawal, 2022). While they may initially lack fluency, learners with this bilingual foundation often outperform native speakers in grammatical precision and functional application, owing to their metalinguistic awareness and adaptability. This paper, therefore, explores the relevance of indigenous language education as a powerful instrument for national development, concluding with recommendations for enhancing the quality and implementation of indigenous language education in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The teaching and learning of indigenous language in Nigeria schools face significant challenges that threaten its sustainability and effectiveness. Despite being indigenous language with cultural and educational significance, there is a noticeable decline in interest and proficiency among students. Many parents and students perceived English and other foreign languages as more beneficial for career advancement, leading to a diminished focus on indigenous language education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to investigate how language lecturers perceive language as a tool of national development in a north central university, Nigeria. Specifically, how language lecturers in each of the faculties perceive language as a tool for national development. The general perception of Language lecturers in both Faculty of Arts and Education as regard indigenous language as a tool for National Development

Research Question

1. What is the general perception of all language lecturers on indigenous language as a tool for national development in both Faculty of Arts and Education the university of Ilorin?

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive research design, which is appropriate for investigating educational phenomena and reporting them as they exist in their natural context. According to Okoro (2017), descriptive research is concerned with the collection of data to accurately and objectively describe existing conditions or phenomena. The population is all the lecturers in the five departments of languages both in the faculty of Arts and Education in the University of Ilorin which is 175. The target population is all lecturers in the Faculty of Arts and Education which is also 175. Faculty of Arts has four departments responsible for teaching languages e.g. English, Arabic, French, Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo, while department of arts education in the faculty of education anchored English, Yoruba, Arabic and French Education. The study sample was 77 lecturers who are responsible for teaching one language or the other using purposive sampling techniques.

Five research questions were anchored and answered while two hypotheses were tested at 9.05 level of significance. The instrument was a checklist which comprised of and a free response option. It was validated by three experts in the department of Arts education. Reliability test was conducted on the instrument with index of 0.75 level of significance.

Data Analyses and Results

This chapter presents the analysis and interpretation of the data collected for the study on the perception of all the Language Lecturers On Indigenous Language as a Tool for National Development in the University of Ilorin, Kwara State

Table 1: Demographic Information of the Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender			
	Male	59	76.6%
	Female	18	23.4%
	Total	77	100
Faculty			
	Arts	67	87%
	Education	10	13%
	Total	77	100

The demographic data presented in the table reflects the distribution of respondents by gender and faculty. Out of the total 77 respondents, a significant majority were male, accounting for 59 individuals or 76.6% of the sample. In contrast, females made up 18 respondents, representing 23.4% of the total. This indicates a substantial gender imbalance in favor of male participants in the study. Regarding faculty affiliation, the data reveals that 67 respondents (87.0%) belonged to the Faculty of Arts, while only 10 respondents (13.0%) were from the Faculty of Education. This suggests that the sample was heavily dominated by students from the Faculty of Arts, with relatively limited representation from the Faculty of Education.

Table 2: Distribution of Respondents Based on Responses to the Variables

S/ N	Item	Response	Frequenc y	Percen t (%)
1	Is language a tool of communication?	Yes	77	100%
2	Does language bring about unity among races?	Yes	71	92.2%
		No	6	7.8%
3	Does language contribute to national development?	Yes	74	96.1%
		No	3	3.9%

4	Does language bring about diplomatic relations among nations?	Yes	75	97.4%
		No	2	2.6%
5	Does language bring about growth to a nation?	Yes	73	94.8%
		No	4	5.2%
6	Does language serve as a symbol of love among the tribes of a nation?	Yes	73	94.8%
		No	4	5.2%
7	Does language contribute to meaningful commercial activities?	Yes	75	97.4%
		No	2	2.6%
8	Can knowledge be acquired without the use of language?	Yes	14	18.2%
		No	63	81.8%
9	Does language assist in the sale of commodities?	Yes	75	97.4%
		No	2	2.6%
10	Does language lead to specialization?	Yes	73	94.8%
		No	4	5.2%
11	Can language make a nation grow economically?	Yes	68	88.3%
		No	9	11.7%
12	Can language learning create job opportunities?	Yes	76	98.7%
		No	1	1.3%
13	Investment in language learning creates skills for job opportunities	Yes	76	98.7%
		No	1	1.3%

The analysis of respondents' views on the significance of language reveals overwhelming agreement on its importance across various domains. All 77 respondents (100%) affirmed that language is a tool of communication, indicating universal recognition of its fundamental role in human interaction. A vast majority of the participants (92.2%) agreed that language brings about unity among races, while only 7.8% disagreed. Similarly, 96.1% believed that language contributes to national development, further highlighting its perceived role in building a cohesive and progressive society.

Regarding diplomacy, 97.4% of the respondents affirmed that language facilitates diplomatic relations among nations, underscoring its significance in international communication and cooperation. A similar proportion (94.8%) acknowledged that language contributes to national growth, and the same percentage also agreed that it serves as a symbol of love among the tribes of a nation, reflecting its role in promoting cultural harmony.

On economic aspects, 97.4% believed language aids in meaningful commercial activities, and an equal percentage said it helps in the sale of commodities, suggesting that language is seen as essential in trade and business transactions. Furthermore, 94.8% affirmed that language leads to specialisation, linking it with skill development and professional advancement. Interestingly, when asked if knowledge can be acquired without language, only 18.2% said yes, while 81.8% disagreed, showing that most participants see language as a necessary medium for learning.

In terms of economic development, 88.3% believed that language can help a nation grow economically, and 98.7% affirmed that language learning creates job opportunities. Likewise, 98.7% agreed that investment in language learning facilitates skills acquisition for employment, emphasising strong support for language education as a means of human capital development. Overall, the responses strongly affirm that language is not only essential for communication but also plays a critical role in national unity, economic development, education, diplomacy, and employment creation.

Research Question

Research question: What is the general the general perception of all the language lecturers on indigenous language as a tool for National Development in both Faculty of Arts and Education

Table 3: General Perception of All the Language Lecturers On Indigenous Language as a Tool for National Development in Both Faculty of Arts and Education

S/N	Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Does language bring about diplomatic relations among nations?	77	1.03	0.16
2	Does language bring about growth to a nation?	77	1.05	0.223
3	Does language serve as a symbol of love among the tribes of a nation?	77	1.05	0.223
4	Does language contribute to meaningful commercial activities?	77	1.03	0.16
5	Can knowledge be acquired without the	77	1.82	0.388

	use of language?			
6	Can language make a nation grow economically?	77	1.12	0.323

The descriptive statistics reveal that the general perception of all language lecturers in both the Faculty of Arts and Education is strongly positive regarding indigenous language as a tool for national development. The mean scores for key indicators such as diplomatic relations (Mean = 1.03), national growth (Mean = 1.05), symbol of love among tribes (Mean = 1.05), and commercial activities (Mean = 1.03) are all very close to 1.00, indicating strong agreement (assuming 1 = Yes, 2 = No). Additionally, lecturers generally agree that indigenous language can contribute to economic growth (Mean = 1.12). Although the item on whether knowledge can be acquired without language has a higher mean of 1.82, suggesting some disagreement, the overall low standard deviations show consistency in responses. These findings confirm that language lecturers from both faculties collectively perceive indigenous language as a vital tool for fostering unity, development, and economic progress in the nation.

Summary of the Findings

Based on the findings from the study the following points were summarised:

1. The majority of the respondents were male and from the Faculty of Arts, indicating a gender and departmental imbalance in the sample.
2. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that indigenous language is essential for communication, national unity, development, diplomacy, economic growth, and employment.
3. Both Arts and Education lecturers strongly affirmed the positive role of indigenous language in national development, with Arts lecturers showing slightly more consistent agreement.

Discussions, Conclusions and Recommendations

Discussions

The findings of this study provide robust support for the view that indigenous languages play a pivotal role in fostering national development, as perceived by language lecturers at the University of Ilorin. The universal agreement among respondents (100%) that language serves as a fundamental tool of communication underscores the foundational role of language in all spheres of societal function. This aligns with the assertion by Ezenwafor and Okolocha (2021), who emphasised that indigenous languages are not merely communication tools but also repositories of culture, knowledge systems, and identity.

The study revealed that 92.2% of respondents agreed that language brings about unity among races, and 96.1% believed that it contributes to national development. These findings support Oyetade (2020), who noted that indigenous languages, when recognized and institutionalized, foster a sense of belonging, social cohesion, and mutual respect among diverse ethnic groups. Language, as a unifier, can mitigate tribalism and marginalization when used in public discourse and governance.

Furthermore, the overwhelming perception that language promotes diplomatic relations (97.4%), commercial activities (97.4%), and specialisation (94.8%) is consistent with Adegbija's (2019) findings, which argue that nations that integrate indigenous languages into commerce and diplomacy witness stronger local participation in development initiatives. The majority opinion also correlates with the work of Ndimele (2021), who noted that language is an economic enabler and essential for grassroots entrepreneurship. The economic relevance of indigenous languages was also strongly endorsed in this study. Approximately 88.3% of lecturers agreed that language contributes to economic growth, while 98.7% believed that language learning creates job opportunities. This affirms the report by UNESCO (2022) that highlighted how investment in indigenous language education not only preserves culture but also equips individuals with employment-ready skills in translation, publishing, media, and education.

In addressing the research questions, the study confirmed that both the Faculty of Arts and Education lecturers share a generally positive perception of indigenous language as a tool for national development. Although Arts lecturers showed slightly stronger agreement, the difference was statistically insignificant. This consistency in perception across faculties is in line with Bamgbose (1983), who argued that regardless of academic discipline, stakeholders in language education tend to recognise the role of indigenous languages in national development due to their firsthand experience in teaching and curriculum implementation.

Conclusion

This study concludes that language lecturers at the University of Ilorin hold a highly favorable perception of indigenous language as a critical instrument for national development. The findings reveal that language is not only essential for communication but also serves as a unifying factor, a driver of economic and educational advancement, a means of cultural integration, and a tool for international diplomacy. Therefore, it is evident that integrating indigenous languages into Nigeria's national development agenda is both a viable and necessary strategy for National Building.

Recommendations

1. Government and educational policymakers should enact policies that promote the use of indigenous languages in official, educational, and commercial sectors to harness their potential for national development.
2. Universities and colleges of education should review their language programs to better integrate indigenous language instruction into broader national development goals such as economic empowerment and cultural preservation.
3. Capacity-building programs should be organized to train language lecturers and educators in contemporary methodologies for teaching indigenous languages in ways that promote national relevance.
4. Awareness should be raised among the public about the value of indigenous languages through media campaigns, cultural festivals, and community education initiatives.
5. Government and private sectors should support radio, television, and digital platforms that operate in indigenous languages to reinforce their relevance and reach.
6. Programs should be developed to encourage youth entrepreneurship in fields such as translation, publishing, indigenous content creation, and language-based tourism.
7. All language development initiatives should consider gender inclusiveness to ensure equal representation and participation of both male and female language experts.
8. More research should be conducted across other Nigerian universities to compare regional perceptions and generate broader insights into how indigenous languages can be better utilized for national growth.

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