

Linguistic Justice and the Nigerian Education System: A Framework for Mother-Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE)

Augustine A. Edung¹, John Nkpot Tanyi², Beatrice N. Ebingha³,
Chidimma Elekwachi⁴

Abstract— *The Nigerian National Policy on Education advocates for mother-tongue instruction in early childhood learning, a principle aligned with global standards for linguistic justice and educational equity. However, the implementation of Mother-Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) remains profoundly ineffective, leading to a pervasive disconnect between policy rhetoric and classroom reality. This persistent failure exacerbates educational inequalities, hinders cognitive development, and marginalizes Nigeria's vast linguistic heritage. This conceptual paper argues that the current challenges—including a lack of political will, inadequate resources, ethno-linguistic politicization, and a misconceived policy framework—stem from a fundamental lack of a coherent, context-specific theoretical and operational model. Moving beyond mere critique, this study proposes a novel, multi-dimensional framework for implementing MTB-MLE in the Nigerian context. Drawing on theoretical foundations of linguistic human rights (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000) and language economics (Grin, 2003), the framework is built on four interdependent pillars: (1) a multi-tiered language selection protocol that categorizes languages based on regional dominance and vitality; (2) a integrated curriculum model that strategically bridges the mother tongue with English; (3) a sustainable teacher training and material development ecosystem; and (4) a participatory governance structure involving communities, policymakers, and educators. The paper concludes that for MTB-MLE to transition from policy phantom to praxis, it must be reimagined not as a cultural annex but as the central pillar of a just, effective, and nationally inclusive educational strategy for Nigeria.*

Keywords: Linguistic Justice; Mother-Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE); Language Policy; Educational Equity; Nigerian Languages.

¹University of Calabar, Calabar — Nigeria, Austinedung89@gmail.com

²University of Calabar, Calabar — Nigeria, Tanyi.john@yahoo.com

³University of Calabar, Calabar — Nigeria, Ngwedeb19@gmail.com

⁴University of Calabar, Calabar — Nigeria, elekwachi@unical.edu.ng

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's linguistic landscape is a tapestry of breathtaking diversity, comprising over 500 languages that represent a significant portion of the world's linguistic heritage. This diversity, encompassing three major language families—Niger-Congo, Afro-Asiatic, and Nilo-Saharan—is a profound cultural asset, encoding unique worldviews, histories, and knowledge systems. From the major languages of Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, spoken by tens of millions, to the myriad minority languages like Tiv, Efik, Kanuri, Ibibio, and the hundreds of smaller languages often spoken by communities numbering in the thousands, Nigeria presents a quintessential case study of linguistic plurality. This richness, however, poses one of the most complex and enduring challenges to the nation's quest for a unified, equitable, and effective educational system.

The recognition of this challenge is not new. The Nigerian National Policy on Education (NPE), first formulated in 1977 and subsequently revised in 1981, 1998, and 2004, explicitly acknowledges the importance of the child's mother tongue in early learning. Specifically, Section 1:8d of the policy mandates that: "the medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years" and that "during this period, English shall be taught as a subject". This policy aligns with a robust global consensus, championed by UNESCO since 1953, that education is best delivered in a language the child understands. The rationale is grounded in irrefutable pedagogical and psychological evidence: a child learns best in a familiar language, building literacy and cognitive skills that can then be transferred to additional languages.

Despite this clear policy directive and the overwhelming evidence supporting it, a vast chasm exists between policy on paper and practice in the classroom. Across much of Nigeria, the default medium of instruction from the very first day of school is English, a language foreign to the vast majority of pupils. The mother tongue is often relegated to an occasional subject or, more commonly, actively discouraged within the school compound. This reality creates an immediate and profound disadvantage for the Nigerian child, who is forced to learn new concepts in an unfamiliar linguistic code, often taught by teachers who are themselves not proficient enough in English to provide quality instruction.

The consequences of this failure are severe and multifaceted. Academically, it contributes to abysmally low literacy rates and poor overall educational outcomes, as children struggle to decipher both the language of instruction and the academic content simultaneously. Cognitively, it denies children the opportunity to develop strong foundational literacy and critical thinking skills in their first language, which is the most effective pathway to cognitive development. Culturally, it devalues indigenous languages and the knowledge they contain, leading to language shift, endangerment,

and a loss of cultural identity. Socially, it perpetuates and exacerbates inequality, privileging a tiny minority of children who have access to English at home while marginalizing the majority.

This paper, therefore, posits that the failure to implement MTB-MLE in Nigeria is not merely a logistical or resource-based failure but, more fundamentally, a failure of conceptualization and framework. The current policy is vague, inflexible, and devoid of a clear implementation roadmap. It fails to account for Nigeria's extreme linguistic diversity, the complex politics of language choice, and the practical realities of teacher capacity and material development. Merely reiterating the policy's existence or calling for its enforcement is an insufficient response to a deeply structural problem.

Consequently, the primary objective of this paper is to move beyond critique and construct a comprehensive, context-sensitive, and justice-oriented framework for the effective implementation of MTB-MLE in Nigeria. This framework is not a one-size-fits-all prescription but a multi-tiered model designed to be adaptable to the diverse linguistic realities across the country's states and communities. It is grounded in the principle of linguistic justice, which asserts that the right to learn in one's mother tongue is a fundamental human right and a prerequisite for equitable educational opportunity.

The structure of this paper will first establish the theoretical and global foundations of MTB-MLE and linguistic justice. It will then conduct a critical diagnosis of the historical and contemporary reasons for policy failure in Nigeria. The core of the paper will be the detailed presentation of the proposed four-pillar framework, addressing language selection, curriculum, teacher development, and governance. Finally, the paper will discuss the implications, anticipate challenges, and reaffirm the argument that a systematic overhaul, guided by justice and pragmatism, is the only path forward for Nigeria's educational system.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The debate over language of instruction is deeply rooted in broader theoretical discourses on human rights, cognitive development, and power. A robust understanding of these foundations is essential for constructing a viable framework for Nigeria. The theoretical underpinnings of Mother-Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) are supported by decades of interdisciplinary research spanning linguistics, education, psychology, and sociology. The seminal work of Jim Cummins (1979, 2000) on linguistic interdependence and the Common Underlying Proficiency is perhaps the most influential in this field. Cummins' theory posits that literacy and cognitive skills developed in a first language (L1) are directly transferable to a second language (L2). This means that time spent building strong literacy in a child's mother

tongue is not time lost on learning English; rather, it provides the crucial foundational proficiency that makes acquiring English literacy significantly easier and more effective. This cognitive argument is complemented by the work of Vygotsky (1978), who emphasized the social nature of learning and the critical role of language in cognitive development. Learning through an unfamiliar language creates a barrier between the child's existing knowledge (gained through their home language) and new school knowledge, hindering the development of higher-order thinking skills. Furthermore, the affective filter hypothesis, part of Stephen Krashen's (1982) theory of second language acquisition, suggests that anxiety and stress—common when a child is forced to learn in an unfamiliar language—can block comprehensible input, thereby impeding language acquisition and learning altogether.

Beyond the cognitive and pedagogical, the MTB-MLE movement is powerfully underpinned by the concept of **linguistic human rights**. This framework, most forcefully articulated by Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (2000, 2008), argues that the right to learn and use one's mother tongue is a fundamental and inalienable human right. In her extensive work, Skutnabb-Kangas contends that the forced imposition of a dominant language in education can be a form of linguistic genocide, as it systematically disadvantages minority language speakers and leads to the attrition and death of their languages. This perspective frames education not merely as a technical issue of pedagogy but as a central arena for social justice and equality.

The philosophy of **linguistic justice** extends this argument, exploring the moral and political obligations of states in managing linguistic diversity. Philosophers like Philippe Van Parijs (2011) have debated whether justice requires the protection of minority languages or the promotion of a common lingua franca for fairness of opportunity. In the Nigerian context, a justice-oriented approach must navigate this tension, recognizing the functional necessity of English as a national lingua franca while fiercely protecting the right of every child to access education in a language they understand. This aligns with the capabilities approach developed by Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2011), where the freedom to use one's language is a fundamental capability that enables the development of other capabilities, such as education and participation in society.

From an economic perspective, François Grin (2003) and others have challenged the assumption that monolingualism in a dominant language is more economically efficient. They argue that neglecting mother-tongue education leads to massive inefficiencies, including high dropout and repetition rates, poor learning outcomes, and ultimately a less-educated workforce. Conversely, effective MTB-MLE can yield both private returns (better jobs for multilingual individuals) and public returns (a more cohesive society, preserved cultural heritage for tourism, and a more robust national

knowledge base). This economic argument is crucial for persuading policymakers who may be swayed by utilitarian calculations.

Globally, the evidence for the success of MTB-MLE is compelling. UNESCO's (2003, 2016) persistent advocacy is based on a wealth of international experience. Case studies from countries like Ethiopia, which implemented a large-scale MTB-MLE policy using several local languages, show significant improvements in student participation and learning outcomes (Hough et al., 2007). Similarly, the successful revitalization of Māori in New Zealand through Kōhanga Reo (language nests) and the strong bilingual education programs in Wales and the Basque Country demonstrate that mother-tongue education is viable and beneficial even in contexts where the language had been previously marginalized (Baker, 2011).

Within the Nigerian academic sphere, scholars have extensively documented the policy-practice disconnect. Ayo Bamgbose (1991, 2000), a foremost Nigerian linguist, has been a lifelong critic of the lip service paid to the language policy, highlighting the lack of political will and the negative attitudes towards African languages. Other scholars, such as Emenanjo (1990), Ofulue (2013), and Mohammed (2017), have detailed the specific challenges, including the lack of orthographies for many languages, the shortage of teaching materials, and the critical deficit in teacher training. This body of work provides a crucial diagnosis of the problem but often stops short of proposing a detailed, holistic, and actionable national framework. This paper seeks to build upon this foundational domestic critique by synthesizing it with global theoretical perspectives to construct a comprehensive model for change.

DIAGNOSIS OF THE NIGERIAN MTB-MLE FAILURE: A MULTI-FACETED ANALYSIS

The consistent failure to implement the Mother-Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) provision of the National Policy on Education (NPE) is not a simple oversight but the result of a complex interplay of political, logistical, societal, and structural factors. A thorough diagnosis is essential to ensure that the proposed framework addresses the root causes rather than just the symptoms of this perennial problem. The single greatest impediment to meaningful progress has been a profound and enduring lack of **political will** at all levels of government. While the NPE exists as a document, it has never been backed by the necessary financial commitment, legal enforcement, or bureaucratic drive to make it a reality. The policy itself is non-justiciable, meaning there is no legal avenue to compel its implementation, rendering it little more than a suggestion.

This lack of political commitment is deeply entangled with the **politicization of language** in Nigeria. The selection of any language, even for educational purposes, is fraught with political tension. The designation of Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba as "major"

languages is already a point of contention among proponents of other large languages like Kanuri, Ibibio, or Fulfulde. Extending this to the community level can ignite fears of dominance and trigger ethnic rivalries. For politicians, advocating for a particular local language can be seen as a tribalistic move, while promoting English is often falsely framed as a neutral, unifying, and modernizing stance. This political calculus prioritizes short-term stability over long-term educational gain.

Furthermore, the colonial legacy has cemented a powerful **ideological hegemony** that privileges English above all indigenous languages. English is not just a language; it is a powerful symbol of modernity, international mobility, and socio-economic advancement. This perception is internalized by all strata of society, from policymakers in Abuja to parents in rural villages. As Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) theory of linguistic capital explains, English is recognized as the currency of power and success in Nigeria. Consequently, parents often demand English-medium education for their children, believing, however mistakenly, that early immersion is the best path to fluency. They see mother-tongue education as a waste of time that will hold their children back, a tragic misconception that creates significant societal resistance to MTB-MLE.

Compounding these political and attitudinal barriers are immense **logistical and resource challenges**. For the vast majority of Nigeria's 500+ languages, there is a critical shortage of essential resources for formal education. Many languages lack a standardized orthography (writing system), without which it is impossible to produce written materials. Even for languages with orthographies, there is a dire scarcity of books, primers, storybooks, and teaching guides. Publishing in these languages is not commercially viable for private companies, and the government has not filled this void with sustained public investment. The result is that even a willing teacher has nothing to teach from.

The most critical resource gap, however, is in **human capital**. There is no large-scale, systematic program for training teachers to teach in indigenous languages, especially as a medium of instruction for other subjects. Most teachers in the public school system were themselves educated in English and lack the pedagogical skills to teach foundational literacy in a local language or to use it to teach mathematics or science. The Teachers' Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN) and the National Teachers' Institute (NTI) have not mainstreamed this crucial skill set into their certification and training programs. This lack of capacity at the classroom level is perhaps the most immediate practical obstacle.

The **structure of the policy itself** is also a major hindrance. The NPE's directive is overly simplistic and rigid. The prescription of "the language of the environment" is difficult to apply in highly multilingual urban centers like Lagos, Kano, or Port Harcourt, where a single classroom may contain children from a dozen different

linguistic backgrounds. The policy also lacks a detailed and phased implementation plan, transition strategies to English, clear assessment benchmarks, or a defined accountability mechanism. It is a statement of intent without a roadmap, leaving state ministries of education without guidance and with a ready excuse for inaction.

Finally, the **broader educational ecosystem** is hostile to MTB-MLE. The national curriculum, standardized tests (like the Common Entrance Examination), and high-stakes exams like the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) are all conducted exclusively in English. This sends a powerful message to schools, teachers, and parents about what knowledge and skills are truly valued by the system. This creates a "washback effect" where teaching is geared towards passing these English-medium exams, further squeezing out any potential space for mother-tongue instruction. The entire system is engineered towards English proficiency, making the NPE's MTB-MLE clause appear as an anomalous and inconvenient appendage rather than a core principle.

PROPOSED FRAMEWORK: A MULTI-TIERED MODEL FOR JUSTICE-ORIENTED MTB-MLE

To overcome the multifaceted failures diagnosed above, Nigeria requires a completely reimagined approach to MTB-MLE. The proposed framework is not a mere tweak but a comprehensive overhaul, built on four interdependent pillars designed to be pragmatic, scalable, and grounded in the principle of linguistic justice. It moves away from a rigid, one-size-fits-all policy to a flexible, multi-tiered model that acknowledges and works with the country's complex linguistic reality. The framework's overarching goal is to ensure that every Nigerian child, regardless of their linguistic background, receives quality foundational education in a language they understand, thereby unlocking their cognitive potential and right to educational equity.

The first and most foundational pillar of the framework is the establishment of a **Contextually-Sensitive Language Selection and Categorization Protocol**. This pillar directly addresses the political and practical challenges of choosing which language(s) to use in which schools. Instead of a vague "language of the environment" directive, the framework proposes a clear three-tier system to guide implementation at the Local Government Area (LGA) and school levels. **Tier A** would comprise languages with official status and vast regional speaker bases, specifically Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. These would be the primary MoI throughout their respective geopolitical zones, including in urban areas, for the first six years of primary education. **Tier B** would include state-level major languages with a robust speaker base and existing orthographic resources, such as Efik, Ibibio, Kanuri, Tiv, and Igala. These would serve as the MoI in their core areas of dominance. **Tier C** would encompass all other languages, including minority and endangered languages. For these, the initial focus

would be on cultural preservation and oral education in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), with support for orthography development with the long-term goal of integration as MoI. This tiered system provides clarity, reduces political conflict by recognizing different levels of linguistic status, and allows for targeted resource allocation.

The second pillar is the development of an **Integrated Curriculum and Phased Transition Pedagogy**. This pillar addresses the pedagogical heart of the issue: what to teach and how to transition between languages. The curriculum for the first three years of primary school would be delivered almost entirely in the approved L1 (from Tiers A or B). This includes literacy (reading and writing), numeracy, and basic science and social studies. English would be taught as a subject by specialist language teachers focusing on oral communication skills. From Primary 4 onwards, a phased transition would begin. The curriculum would become deliberately bilingual, with specific subjects gradually switching to English as the MoI, while others might remain in L1. This model, often called the "bridge" model, is carefully designed to ensure that literacy in L1 is firmly established before being used as a scaffold to acquire literacy in L2 (English). The curriculum frameworks must be developed centrally by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) in collaboration with linguistic experts, but allow for local adaptation to incorporate culturally relevant examples, stories, and knowledge systems, making learning more meaningful and engaging for children.

The third pillar, crucial for sustainability, is the creation of a **Sustainable Teacher Development and Material Creation Ecosystem**. This pillar tackles the critical resource gaps in trained teachers and teaching materials. A flagship national "MTB-MLE Teacher Corps" program would be established. Recruitment would target fluent speakers of target languages, who would undergo a specialized two-year diploma program focusing on pedagogy for teaching foundational literacy in Nigerian languages and methodologies for teaching content areas in these languages. Incentives, such as special allowances and accelerated career paths, would be offered to attract and retain these specialists. Simultaneously, a massive in-service training and certification program would be launched for existing teachers. For material development, a decentralized model is proposed. Each state would have a Materials Development Resource Centre, funded by a federal grant scheme and staffed by curriculum experts, writers, and illustrators. Their mandate would be to produce low-cost, high-quality teaching and learning materials in the Tier A and B languages of their state. This would involve simplifying the national curriculum into local languages and creating a wealth of supplementary readers and storybooks.

The fourth and final pillar is the implementation of a **Participatory Governance, Funding, and Advocacy Structure**. A policy of this magnitude cannot be dictated from

Abuja alone; it requires buy-in and coordination at all levels. A new National MTB-MLE Implementation Committee should be formed, chaired by the Minister of Education and comprising state commissioners of education, representatives of the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), the Teachers' Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN), the National Institute for Cultural Orientation (NICO), linguists from Nigerian universities, and representatives from civil society organizations. This committee would oversee policy, release funding, and monitor progress. At the community level, School-Based Management Committees (SBMCs) would be empowered and trained to advocate for and monitor MTB-MLE implementation in their local schools, ensuring community ownership. Funding must be ring-fenced within the federal and state education budgets, with a specific percentage dedicated solely to MTB-MLE activities. Finally, a nationwide public awareness campaign, using media and community channels, is essential to shift parental and societal attitudes by demonstrating the cognitive and economic benefits of the program, framing it not as a rejection of English but as the most effective strategy for mastering it.

DISCUSSION

The proposed framework represents a significant departure from the current state of inaction and provides a concrete path toward realizing linguistic justice in Nigerian education. However, its ambitious nature inevitably invites scrutiny regarding its feasibility, potential challenges, and broader implications. A critical discussion of these aspects is necessary to validate the framework and anticipate the realities of its implementation. The most immediate challenge will be the **significant upfront financial investment** required. Establishing teacher training programs, developing and printing materials for multiple languages, and funding a national advocacy campaign will demand a substantial reallocation of resources within already strained education budgets. This necessitates strong political commitment and a willingness to prioritize long-term educational gains over short-term political projects. The economic argument, however, is compelling. The current system is incredibly wasteful, producing high rates of failure, dropouts, and remediation. Investing in MTB-MLE is an investment in efficiency; it will reduce wastage and yield a higher return in the form of a better-educated citizenry in the long run.

Another major challenge lies in the **complexity of implementation**, particularly the language categorization protocol. While designed to reduce conflict, the process of categorizing a language as Tier A, B, or C could itself become politicized. Communities may lobby for their language to be placed in a higher tier to gain access to resources and recognition. Managing these tensions will require transparent criteria, democratic deliberation at the state and LGA levels, and sensitive leadership. Furthermore, the

model for highly multilingual urban classrooms remains a tough nut to crack. In such settings, a single Tier A or B language may not be appropriate. Solutions may involve more creative approaches, such as grouping students by language background for literacy instruction or employing multilingual teaching assistants, but these require further research and piloting.

The success of the framework is entirely contingent on **addressing the deep-seated societal attitudes** that privilege English. The national advocacy campaign is therefore not an optional add-on but a core component of the strategy. This campaign must be sophisticated, leveraging respected figures from academia, business, and entertainment to deliver the message that strong mother-tongue education is the key to mastering English and succeeding academically. It must reframe MTB-MLE not as a parochial, backwards-looking project but as a modern, evidence-based strategy for national development. Changing hearts and minds is a slow process, and expectations must be managed accordingly.

The implications of successful implementation are profound. For **educational policy**, it would mean a fundamental shift from a system that privileges a foreign language to one that is built on the linguistic realities of its learners. It would necessitate a comprehensive review of the national curriculum, assessment systems, and teacher education standards to align them with multilingual objectives. For **practice**, it would empower teachers with the skills and materials they need to be effective and would transform the classroom experience for millions of children from one of confusion and alienation to one of comprehension and engagement.

On a broader scale, the framework has immense potential for **socio-cultural development**. By valorizing indigenous languages in the formal domain of education, it would trigger a renaissance in Nigerian literature, music, and film in these languages. It would strengthen cultural identity and intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Economically, a multilingual population is a strategic asset in the global economy and within the African continental free trade area. Finally, and most importantly, it would be a monumental step towards **social justice**, ensuring that a child's fate is not predetermined by their access to English at home but is instead unlocked through an education system that truly starts with the child.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the chronic failure to implement Mother-Tongue Based Multilingual Education in Nigeria is a fundamental injustice and a primary driver of the country's educational crisis. The existing National Policy on Education, while well-intentioned, is a hollow shell—a statement of principle devoid of the operational clarity, political backing, and resource commitment necessary for transformation. The consequences of this failure are severe: generations of Nigerian children have been

denied their right to quality education, their cognitive potential stunted, and their cultural heritage eroded because they are forced to learn in a language they do not understand.

The diagnosis revealed a complex web of impediments, ranging from a crippling lack of political will and the politicization of language choice to pervasive negative attitudes, a crippling shortage of resources, and a flawed policy structure. It is clear that tinkering at the edges of this problem is futile. What is required is a radical re-imagination of the entire approach to language in education, grounded in the inviolable principle of linguistic justice.

The multi-tiered framework proposed in this paper offers a comprehensive and pragmatic roadmap for such a transformation. By addressing the four critical pillars of language selection, curriculum and pedagogy, teacher development, and governance, it provides a systemic solution to a systemic problem. It acknowledges Nigeria's linguistic diversity not as a problem to be managed but as a resource to be harnessed. It replaces a rigid, one-size-fits-all policy with a flexible, context-sensitive model that can be adapted to different realities across the federation.

The path forward will undoubtedly be challenging. It will require courageous political leadership, significant financial investment, and a sustained effort to change public attitudes. However, the cost of inaction is far greater. Continuing on the current path guarantees the perpetuation of educational inequality, economic inefficiency, and cultural loss. Embracing a robust MTB-MLE system is the only way to build a truly inclusive, effective, and just educational system that unlocks the potential of every Nigerian child. It is time to move beyond policy rhetoric and embark on the deliberate journey of making linguistic justice a lived reality in Nigeria's classrooms.

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