



The Inevitability of Linguistic Challenges in Multilingual Societies: The Case of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: Nigeria presents one of Africa's most extensive multilingual settings, with more than 500 indigenous languages interacting with English, Nigerian Pidgin, Arabic and French across education, government, commerce, media, health and digital communication. This article examines why linguistic challenges recur in multilingual societies and assesses their Nigerian expressions through a conceptual and thematic review of contemporary scholarship, policy documents and foundational language-planning literature. The analysis identifies six connected pressures: unequal status allocation, contested language-of-instruction choices, weak implementation of multilingual policy, major-minority language asymmetry, intergenerational language shift and digital under-representation. The article argues that such pressures are structurally predictable because multilingual states must distribute communicative functions among languages that possess unequal institutional resources and social prestige. Their recurrence, however, does not make exclusion, conflict or language loss unavoidable. Nigeria can reduce their severity through decentralised language planning, multilingual public services, sustained corpus development, teacher preparation, community-led language transmission and equitable language technologies. The article therefore interprets inevitability as a continuing governance responsibility, not as a justification for English-only administration or the neglect of indigenous languages.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Multilingualism describes the presence and use of more than one language by individuals, communities or institutions. At the social level, it includes the distribution of languages across families, schools, markets, religious organizations, courts, media systems and public administration. Such diversity supports cultural memory, wider communicative repertoires and access to several knowledge traditions. It also requires constant decisions about which language should carry public authority, which language children should first encounter in formal education, how minority speakers should obtain state services and how public institutions should finance translation, terminology and teacher preparation. Multilingualism therefore combines cultural abundance with a persistent coordination problem. The problem does not arise because several languages exist; it arises because institutions assign unequal value, resources and functions to them (Cooper, 1989; Spolsky, 2004).

Nigeria offers a particularly instructive case. The National Language Policy recognizes more than 540 indigenous languages and allocates roles to English, Nigerian languages, Nigerian Pidgin, French, Arabic and Nigerian Sign Language (Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council [NERDC], 2022). These languages do not occupy equal positions. English controls most high-status domains, including higher education, legislation, superior courts, formal employment and national administration. Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba enjoy wider regional circulation and stronger literary traditions than many minority languages, while Nigerian Pidgin functions as an important bridge language in urban interaction, broadcasting, entertainment and commerce. Numerous smaller languages remain confined to home and local community use, and some face weakening transmission to children. This layered arrangement produces a hierarchy rather than a neutral catalogue of languages (Adegbija, 2004; Ndiribe & Aboh, 2022).

The expression ‘linguistic challenges’ refers to the practical and political difficulties that accompany this unequal distribution. The term covers communication barriers, educational exclusion, contested language choice, language-based marginalization, inadequate teaching materials, and insufficient terminology for specialized domains, negative attitudes towards indigenous languages, translation deficits and declining intergenerational transmission. These problems overlap. A language that receives little educational investment may lack textbooks and trained teachers; the same shortage can lower parental confidence, limit digital content and reduce opportunities for formal employment through that language. Consequently, institutional neglect and social preference often reinforce each other (Owojecho, 2020; Uwena & Okafor, 2025).

The word ‘inevitability’ requires careful definition. It should not imply that multilingual societies must experience permanent conflict or that linguistic inequality follows naturally from diversity. Instead, it identifies a predictable fact: whenever several language communities share political and economic institutions, questions of selection, access, representation and resource allocation will repeatedly arise. A state may manage those questions fairly or unfairly, but it cannot remove them by announcing a single official language. Monolingual administration can conceal the questions while transferring their cost to citizens who lack proficiency in the selected language. Thus, the challenge remains, even when institutions present it as a private deficiency of minority speakers (Hornberger, 2002; Albaugh, 2014).

Contemporary developments intensify this discussion. Migration and urbanization bring speakers of many languages into schools, workplaces and neighborhoods where no single indigenous language represents every participant. Digital platforms reward languages with large datasets, standard orthographies and commercial markets. Artificial intelligence systems reproduce the inequalities of available data, leaving many African languages with weak speech recognition, machine translation and information retrieval. Research on Nigerian language technologies has demonstrated both the possibility of building substantial resources for Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and Nigerian Pidgin and the continuing bias caused by low representation and poor distinction among related Pidgin varieties (Muhammad et al., 2022; Adelani et al., 2025).

Recent policy development also creates a new analytical moment. Nigeria adopted its first comprehensive National Language Policy in 2022 and later issued implementation guidance that extends language planning beyond schooling to governance, technology, health, media, security and cultural life (Lawani, 2025). The policy represents an important departure from fragmented provisions. However, policy recognition does not automatically produce materials, teachers, interpreters, terminology or public acceptance. Earlier studies have repeatedly documented the distance between policy declarations and actual language practice (Ugwu, 2020; Obiakor, 2024). The present article therefore examines the structural sources of recurring linguistic challenges and considers how Nigeria can manage them without treating diversity as either an automatic blessing or an unavoidable curse.

The article advances a balanced position. Nigeria needs English for interregional communication, international scholarship and global economic participation. The use of English, however, should not require the civic, educational or digital weakening of indigenous languages. A workable multilingual order must separate the value of a shared language from the concentration of nearly all public opportunity in that language. Such an order should allocate functions across levels of government, develop languages according to actual community needs and support flexible multilingual practice instead of imposing a uniform formula on every locality.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Nigeria has produced several language provisions, educational policies and scholarly proposals, but English continues to dominate the institutions that determine educational progression, public employment, legal participation and national visibility. The 2022 National Language Policy provides a broader framework, but implementation still depends on legislation, sustained finance, trained personnel, language resources and cooperation across federal, state and local authorities. Recent research reports low adherence to earlier mother-tongue provisions, strong English preference among schoolchildren and educated parents, inadequate classroom resources, and institutional patterns that marginalize smaller language communities (Obiakor, 2024; Eze & Amoniyon, 2025; Babatunde & Akinnawo, 2026). These findings show that the linguistic question extends beyond the formal recognition of diversity. Much Nigerian scholarship treats language policy, education, marginalization, endangerment and digital access as separate topics. Such division can obscure the common mechanism that links them: institutions must allocate limited authority and resources among languages whose speakers possess unequal political influence, demographic size, economic power and written infrastructure. The unresolved conceptual problem concerns whether recurring linguistic difficulties are intrinsic to multilingualism or products of particular governance choices. This article addresses that problem by distinguishing unavoidable coordination questions from preventable inequality. It also develops an integrated account of how educational practice, state administration, family language choice and digital technology reproduce one another in Nigeria.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. Examine the structural reasons linguistic challenges recur in multilingual societies.
2. Analyse the principal forms of linguistic challenge in Nigeria’s educational, governmental, social and digital domains.
3. Evaluate how language hierarchy, policy implementation and social attitudes sustain these challenges.
4. Propose a context-sensitive framework for managing Nigeria’s linguistic diversity more equitably and productively.

4. CONCEPTUAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Why do linguistic challenges repeatedly arise in multilingual societies?
2. What forms do these challenges take in Nigeria?
3. How do institutional arrangements and social language choices reproduce the challenges?
4. What principles and measures can reduce the severity of Nigeria's linguistic challenges?

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

5.1 Multilingual Societies and Linguistic Challenges

A multilingual society contains several overlapping speech communities rather than a set of sealed monolingual groups. Individuals may use one language at home, another in trade, another in religion and a further language in formal education. Code-switching and translanguaging frequently serve practical purposes, especially in cities and mixed workplaces. For that reason, a multilingual society should be understood through patterns of use and institutional power, not only through the number of named languages. Spolsky (2004) distinguishes language practices, language beliefs and language management. This distinction helps explain why a government may announce support for indigenous languages while schools, parents and employers continue to reward English. Policy operates through these three dimensions together.

Linguistic challenges begin when communicative needs intersect with unequal social valuation. A common language can lower transaction costs and support interregional communication, but the selection of that language can also restrict access to public goods. Cooper (1989) argues that language planning always concerns social change because planners seek to influence who uses which language, for what purpose and under what conditions. Therefore, language selection is not a purely technical choice. It distributes advantages among speakers, affects the cost of schooling and shapes whose knowledge appears legitimate in formal settings.

Hornberger's (2002) ecological account treats multilingualism as an interdependent system. Languages gain or lose vitality through the environments that support literacy, oral use, education and public recognition. A policy may recognize a language symbolically but weaken it materially if it provides no teachers, books or examinations. Conversely, community use can sustain a language even when state support remains limited. The ecological approach therefore directs attention to relationships among domains and to the cumulative effects of small decisions. It also shows why the removal of one language from schooling can alter family choices, digital production and community prestige.

The present article defines linguistic challenges as recurrent difficulties in securing fair, effective and sustainable communication across a society whose languages differ in demographic reach, institutional development and social prestige. This definition separates diversity itself from the institutional conditions that turn difference into disadvantage. It also accommodates both immediate communication barriers and long-term processes such as language shift.

5.2 Nigeria's Linguistic Ecology

Nigeria's linguistic ecology developed through precolonial mobility, trade, empire, migration, missionary education, colonial administration and post-independence state formation. Indigenous languages belong to several language families and vary greatly in speaker population, geographic concentration, standardization and written use. Hausa functions widely across northern Nigeria and neighboring countries; Yoruba and Igbo hold major regional positions; Nigerian Pidgin supports interethnic communication in many southern cities and increasingly across the country. Arabic carries religious and educational importance, particularly in Muslim communities, while French has strategic regional value because Nigeria borders Francophone states. English occupies the official center of the national system (Adegbiya, 2004; NERDC, 2021).

This ecology creates different forms of multilingualism. Some rural communities remain relatively concentrated around one indigenous language, while large cities bring together many language groups. Families may also become multilingual through interethnic marriage, migration and schooling. A single phrase such as 'language of the immediate environment' can therefore refer to a locally dominant indigenous language, Nigerian Pidgin, English or a changing mixture. Obiakor (2024) found that implementation of language-of-instruction policy differed by school type, region and urban-rural location, which indicates that a uniform policy encounters very different local conditions.

The distinction between major and minority languages further shapes access. Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba receive constitutional and educational attention, but their expansion can place smaller languages under pressure. Senayon (2021), for example, showed that the use of Yoruba as the medium of primary education in Ogu-speaking communities contributed to shift away from Ogu, despite a national policy intended to protect the language of the immediate environment. The Nigerian case therefore includes two related hierarchies: English over indigenous languages and larger indigenous languages over smaller ones.

Ndiribe and Aboh (2022) connect multilingualism with political marginalization when institutions distribute benefits through winner-takes-all arrangements. Their argument does not establish that multilingualism causes exclusion. It demonstrates that linguistic difference provides a channel through which unequal political systems can classify and disadvantage groups. Nigeria's linguistic ecology thus interacts with federalism, ethnicity, religion, migration and uneven regional development.

5.3 Colonial Language Hierarchy and English Dominance

Colonial administration established English as a language of authority, schooling and social mobility. Independence retained this arrangement because English appeared to offer a neutral means of communication among large language groups and a route into international institutions. Albaugh (2014) demonstrates that many African states maintained colonial languages partly because governments lacked the administrative resources and political agreement required to expand indigenous languages across education. Nigeria followed this pattern, although its policies also recognized indigenous languages in early education and national culture.

English dominance now rests on more than colonial history. Parents associate it with examination success, higher education, urban employment and international mobility. Uwena and Okafor (2025) found increasing preference for English among schoolchildren in Calabar and Owerri, influenced by parents, teachers, peers, religion and the broad opportunities attached to English proficiency. Babatunde and Akinawo (2026) similarly reported weak intergenerational commitment to indigenous languages among educated bilingual parents. These patterns show that language hierarchy operates through rational household calculations as well as state policy.

However, individual choice occurs under unequal conditions. Families select English because schools, employers and digital platforms attach stronger rewards to it. The accumulated effect then confirms the belief that indigenous languages lack value beyond informal interaction. Ezevwu et al. (2025) therefore propose a decolonizing approach that retains the practical advantages of English while broadening the instructional and cultural role of locally meaningful language varieties. The problem is not the acquisition of English; it is the narrowing of educational worth and public legitimacy to English alone.

Nigerian Pidgin complicates the hierarchy. It facilitates broad communication and has gained visibility through music, film, radio and digital news, but formal education and state administration offer it limited recognition. The language's reach makes it a plausible bridge in some contexts, although regional variation and stigma remain. Adelani et al. (2025) found that generative artificial intelligence systems often treat Nigerian Naija and wider West African Pidgin as equivalent, despite differences in vocabulary and structure. This example shows that a language can be socially widespread but institutionally and technologically under-described.

5.4 Language Policy and the Implementation Deficit

Language policy identifies the status, functions and development priorities of languages. Status planning assigns public roles; corpus planning develops orthographies, terminology and reference materials; acquisition planning supports learning; and prestige planning influences attitudes. Nigeria has attempted these activities through constitutional provisions, the National Policy on Education, language institutes, curriculum development and the 2022 National Language Policy. The new policy broadens the field by addressing governance, media, technology, health, security and cultural production (NERDC, 2022; Lawani, 2025).

The persistent difficulty lies in implementation. Ugwu (2020) argues that Nigerian language planning often remains rhetorical because political commitment does not match policy declaration. Owojecho (2020) identifies weak guidelines, limited corpus development, elite preference for English and unclear roles for indigenous languages in governance. Ali and Musa (2025) add that ethnicity, educational inequality and the urban-rural divide shape policy practice. Taken together, these studies describe implementation as a social and institutional process rather than a final administrative step.

A policy can fail through ambiguity as well as neglect. Chukwuokoro et al. (2025) argue that statutory wording can silence indigenous languages when it grants foreign languages clearer functions or treats indigenous use as optional. Such wording allows institutions to postpone action because compliance lacks deadlines, budgets and enforceable standards. Aroge and Makalela (2024) similarly show that inclusive policy requires translanguaging and multilingual pedagogy, not only formal recognition of indigenous languages.

The implementation deficit also reflects scale. Developing curricula, teacher education, dictionaries, technical terminology and assessment instruments for hundreds of languages demands long-term investment. The cost cannot be removed, but it can be distributed through decentralized planning, inter-state cooperation, language clusters, open educational resources and staged priorities based on community demand. Lawani (2025) presents implementation as a multispectral responsibility that requires legislation, research, advocacy, capacity building, translation, quality assurance, partnerships and stable finance.

5.5 Multilingual Education and the Medium of Instruction

Education concentrates Nigeria's linguistic tensions because schools connect language to literacy, subject knowledge, assessment and future employment. The National Policy on Education historically supported instruction through the language of the immediate environment during the early primary years, followed by increasing use of English. This transitional arrangement seeks to combine initial comprehension with later national and international access. In practice, many private and urban schools use English from the beginning, while some multilingual classrooms lack a clear indigenous language shared by all learners (Igboanusi & Peter, 2016; Obiakor, 2024).

Recent findings require a careful interpretation. Obiakor (2024) reported low policy adherence and found that pupils taught in English performed better on the literacy measure used in the study. The author cautions that findings from more homogeneous settings may not transfer directly to Nigeria's highly diverse environment. This result does not establish the general superiority of English. It points to the importance of implementation quality, teacher proficiency, materials, assessment language and the match between the chosen indigenous language and learners' actual repertoires.

Eze and Amoniyan (2025) found that Nigerian teachers faced language-related barriers, inadequate resources and limited preparation for multilingual classrooms. These conditions can cause a sound policy principle to produce weak outcomes. Teachers may translate informally, alternate languages without planning or rely on English because textbooks and examinations demand it. Effective multilingual education therefore requires structured pedagogy, not a simple command to use the mother tongue.

The educational challenge also concerns transition. Learners need strong literacy foundations and access to English, but abrupt movement from a familiar language to English can disrupt subject learning. Flexible bilingual approaches, planned translanguaging, parallel terminology and staged literacy development can preserve comprehension while building wider communicative capacity. Hornberger (2002) presents illiteracy as a continuum, which supports educational models that develop languages together instead of treating one as a temporary bridge to be discarded.

5.6 Language Rights, Public Services and Social Participation

Language determines whether citizens can understand laws, health information, electoral messages and administrative procedures. English-only public communication creates a hidden participation threshold. Citizens may speak English conversationally but lack the specialized literacy required for legal forms, medical consent or technical policy documents. Translation into indigenous languages is therefore part of effective administration, not a decorative cultural exercise.

The problem becomes more serious during emergencies and health encounters. Krystallidou et al. (2021) show that multilingual healthcare requires reliable language support, trained interpreters and professional competence in language-discordant interaction. In the Nigerian context, Babalola et al. (2025) argue that local-language communication can improve understanding, satisfaction, compliance and health outcomes. These findings connect language policy with material welfare and demonstrate that linguistic exclusion can produce practical harm.

Public services cannot translate every document into every Nigerian language at the same level. However, institutions can map language demand, provide priority translations, use trained interpreters, support plain-language versions and employ multilingual communication through local radio and community organizations. A decentralized model allows state and local governments to select languages according to population and service use while federal institutions maintain common standards for accuracy and access.

Language rights also require protection against the domination of smaller groups by regional majorities. A policy that replaces English with only Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba would reproduce exclusion in another form. Fairness therefore calls for layered multilingualism: a shared language for interregional functions, strong regional languages where appropriate, and guaranteed local access for minority communities.

5.7 Intergenerational Transmission and Language Endangerment

Languages remain viable when children acquire them and find meaningful reasons to use them. School policy matters, but family transmission remains fundamental. Urban families may adopt English because parents come from different language groups, because children attend English-medium schools or because parents associate indigenous-language use with restricted opportunity. Babatunde and Akinawo (2026) found that many educated bilingual parents gave limited priority to passing native languages to their children. This pattern places even major Nigerian languages under long-term pressure in educated urban homes.

Language shift is cumulative. Reduced home use limits children's vocabulary; weak vocabulary lowers confidence; low confidence reduces reading and public use; reduced demand then discourages publishers and digital developers. Senayon's (2021) study of Ogu demonstrates how schooling through a stronger neighboring language can accelerate the same process for minority communities. Language endangerment therefore follows both vertical pressure from English and horizontal pressure from larger indigenous languages.

Revitalization requires more than appeals to cultural pride. Families need children's books, films, games, keyboards, dictionaries and attractive digital content. Schools need age-appropriate materials and teachers who can develop literacy instead of relying only on oral fluency. Communities also need opportunities to use their languages in enterprise, local government, religious life and creative production. The International Decade of Indigenous Languages frames preservation as coordinated action across education, public life and technology (UNESCO, 2022).

5.8 Digital Multilingualism and Language Technology

Digital technology can either reduce or deepen linguistic inequality. Languages with large text and speech datasets gain better search, translation, voice interfaces and artificial intelligence support. Languages with limited standardized data remain difficult for commercial systems, which reduces their online usefulness and further lowers content creation. Joshi et al. (2020) describe this global disparity as a serious limitation in natural language processing research.

African researchers have demonstrated practical alternatives. Nekoto et al. (2020) used participatory research to develop machine-translation resources for more than 30 African languages. Muhammad et al. (2022) created a large sentiment corpus for Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and Nigerian Pidgin, including code-mixed data. These initiatives show that low-resource status is not a permanent property of a language; it reflects past investment and can change through coordinated data creation, open tools and community participation. Digital inclusion also demands linguistic accuracy and community control. Adelani et al. (2025) show that systems trained on broad West African Pidgin data can misrepresent Nigerian Naija. Similar risks apply to dialects, diacritics and culturally specific meanings

in indigenous languages. UNESCO's (2025) Global Roadmap for Multilingualism in the Digital Era therefore promotes community participation, ethical data governance, capacity building, policy support and responsible research. Nigeria's language planning must now include digital corpora, speech data, keyboard support, terminology and evaluation benchmarks as public infrastructure.

6. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

6.1 Language Policy as Social Planning

The article draws first on Cooper's (1989) theory of language planning. Cooper defines the central question of planning through the people whose behavior planners seek to influence, the language forms or functions involved, the intended social purposes and the conditions of implementation. This approach rejects the view that language planning concerns grammar alone. Orthography, terminology and curriculum matter because they alter access to education, employment, public authority and cultural representation. Cooper's framework clarifies the Nigerian problem. English dominates because institutions have repeatedly assigned it the functions connected to advancement. Indigenous languages receive symbolic recognition but less sustained acquisition, corpus and status planning. Therefore, changing the hierarchy requires coordinated social measures: teacher education, examinations, public service rules, translation budgets, terminology development, media production and digital resources. Policy cannot change language behavior through declaration alone.

6.2 The Ecological Approach to Multilingualism

The second framework is Hornberger's (2002) ecological approach and continua of illiteracy. The ecological perspective examines how languages interact with educational, political, economic and cultural environments. It treats multilingual repertoires as resources and pays attention to power relations that expand some languages while restricting others. The continua of illiteracy reject rigid divisions between first and second language, oral and written language, or local and global knowledge. They support movement across these dimensions according to learning needs.

Applied to Nigeria, the ecological approach explains why a single nationwide formula cannot address every setting. Rural communities, multilingual cities, minority-language areas, border regions and interethnic households present different patterns. The framework supports layered policy, flexible bilingual education and planned translanguaging. It also shows that language vitality depends on connected domains. Schooling alone cannot sustain a language if family transmission, media, public services and digital use decline.

Together, Cooper and Horn Berger provide a suitable integrated position. Cooper explains deliberate institutional intervention, while Horn Berger explains the relationships among languages, users and domains. The combined framework treats recurring linguistic challenges as the outcome of continuing social allocation in a changing ecology. It therefore supports the article's central argument: coordination questions are unavoidable, but exclusion and language loss reflect remediable planning choices.

7. METHODOLOGY

The article adopted a conceptual and thematic literature-review design. It examined peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, conference proceedings and official policy documents concerned with multilingualism, language policy, language education, linguistic marginalization, language endangerment, public communication and digital language resources. The principal geographical focus was Nigeria, while African and international scholarship supplied theoretical and comparative support.

Sources were located through Google Scholar, publisher platforms, institutional repositories, the ACL Anthology, UNESCO and NERDC publication portals. Searches combined terms such as 'Nigeria multilingualism', 'language policy Nigeria', 'language of instruction Nigeria', 'indigenous language endangerment Nigeria', 'linguistic marginalization', 'multilingual public services' and 'Nigerian language technology'. The review prioritized work published from 2020 to July 2026. Earlier sources were retained where they provided foundational theory or historical analysis. Each bibliographic record and DOI was checked against a publisher page, official repository or recognized scholarly index.

The final analytical corpus comprised 30 sources. Selection required direct relevance to at least one research question, identifiable authorship and publication details, and sufficient information to assess the source's argument or findings. The analysis proceeded through repeated reading, coding and comparison. Codes were grouped under six themes: institutional language hierarchy, education and medium of instruction, policy implementation, public access and participation, intergenerational transmission, and digital representation. The conceptual results that follow are deductions from this synthesis; they are not statistical findings from original field data.

8. CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

8.1 Research Question One: Why Do Linguistic Challenges Repeatedly Arise in Multilingual Societies?

The synthesis indicates that linguistic challenges recur because multilingual societies must coordinate communication while languages possess unequal resources and social positions. Public institutions cannot operate without selecting languages for legislation, schooling, records, broadcasting and service delivery. Every selection creates inclusion for some speakers and adjustment costs for others. The challenge therefore arises at the point where communicative efficiency meets distributive fairness.

Four structural conditions make recurrence predictable. First, language communities differ in size and geographic concentration. Second, languages differ in standardization, written materials and specialized terminology. Third, speakers possess unequal political and economic influence. Fourth, language repertoires change through migration, marriage, schooling, media and technology. A policy that once matched a locality may lose relevance as population patterns change. Multilingual governance therefore requires review and adaptation instead of a permanent settlement.

The analysis also distinguishes coordination from domination. A shared language can serve legitimate national functions, but domination occurs when that language monopolizes nearly all high-value domains and public institutions treat other languages as private or informal. English in Nigeria solves some interregional communication problems, but English-only practice transfers translation and learning costs to citizens. The presence of a lingua franca does not remove linguistic challenges; it changes who bears them.

The first conceptual result is thus that recurrent linguistic questions are inevitable as matters of governance, but harmful outcomes remain conditional. Diversity generates continuing choices about function and access. Political design determines whether those choices produce flexible multilingualism or systematic exclusion.

8.2 Research Question Two: What Forms Do These Challenges Take in Nigeria?

The Nigerian evidence reveals six principal forms. The first is status inequality. English carries national authority and access to elite education, while most indigenous languages have restricted formal functions. The second is major-minority asymmetry. Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba can marginalize smaller languages when institutions treat them as substitutes for every local language. The third is educational mismatch. Policies may select a language that teachers cannot teach effectively or that learners do not share.

The fourth form is implementation weakness. Policy statements often lack enforceable duties, budgets, trained personnel and monitoring. The fifth is intergenerational shift. Parents may choose English at home because it promises educational and economic advantage, which reduces children's competence in indigenous languages. The sixth is digital exclusion. Languages without datasets, keyboards, spellcheckers, speech resources and standard terminology receive weaker support from online and artificial intelligence systems.

These forms reinforce each other. English-medium schooling strengthens English preference at home. Low home transmission reduces the future supply of teachers, writers and developers. Limited publication and digital content then confirm the belief that indigenous languages lack modern usefulness. Minority languages face an added burden because they must compete with both English and regionally dominant indigenous languages.

The second conceptual result is that Nigeria does not face one language problem. It faces an interconnected chain of status, acquisition, implementation, transmission and technology problems. Policies that address only classroom language or symbolic recognition will therefore produce limited change.

8.3 Research Question Three: How Do Institutions and Social Choices Reproduce the Challenges?

Institutional rules reproduce language hierarchy by linking English to examinations, certification, public records and employment. Schools then respond to the incentives created by universities and labor markets. Parents respond to school requirements by increasing English use at home. Employers interpret English proficiency as evidence of education and competence, even when a position also requires local communication. These mutually reinforcing decisions create a cycle that no single household can easily reverse.

Policy ambiguity permits continuation of the cycle. When legislation uses optional language or assigns responsibility without finance, institutions can praise multilingualism while maintaining English-only routines. Chukwuokoro et al. (2025) describe this pattern as statutory silencing. The issue is not merely absent policy; it is a form of recognition that carries little operational force.

Social attitudes add another layer. Speakers may regard indigenous languages as unsuitable for science, administration or professional life because institutions rarely demonstrate their use in those domains. Corpus limitations can be real, especially for technical terminology, but they result partly from low investment. Languages develop specialized registers through sustained translation, scholarship and professional use. Treating present resource differences as permanent linguistic deficiencies confuses historical neglect with inherent capacity.

Digital systems now amplify this process. Large platforms train models on available data, and available data reflect earlier inequalities. Weak performance discourages users from creating content in the language, which maintains data scarcity. Community-led initiatives such as Masakhane and NaijaSenti demonstrate that collaborative resource creation can interrupt the cycle (Nekoto et al., 2020; Muhammad et al., 2022).

The third conceptual result is that institutional allocation and social choice form a feedback system. Individuals make understandable decisions under unequal incentives, but the aggregate effect reproduces the hierarchy that shaped those decisions. Reform must therefore change both institutional opportunity and public confidence.

8.4 Research Question Four: What Principles and Measures Can Reduce the Severity of the Challenges?

The synthesis supports a principle of layered multilingualism. Nigeria should retain English for national and international functions, but it should distribute public communication across federal, state and local levels according to actual language demand. Federal institutions can establish minimum language-access standards; states can identify priority languages; local governments can provide

services through community languages and trained interpreters. This arrangement avoids both English-only centralization and the unrealistic expectation that every language must perform every function immediately.

A second principle is functional development. Languages gain prestige when people use them for meaningful purposes. Government investment should therefore connect corpus planning with health, agriculture, law, science, media and digital services. Terminology committees should include linguists, teachers, professionals and community speakers. Open licenses can allow textbooks, dictionaries and public translations to circulate across institutions.

A third principle is educational flexibility with accountability. Schools should map learners' repertoires, select appropriate instructional combinations and prepare teachers for planned bilingual practice. The state should assess comprehension, literacy and subject learning in order to improve models rather than judging policy only by whether a named language appeared in the classroom. English development should continue, but it should build on strong comprehension and literacy instead of replacing them prematurely.

A fourth principle is intergenerational support. Public campaigns should move beyond moral appeals and provide families with practical resources: children's literature, audio materials, digital games, community classes and culturally relevant media. Universities and teacher-education institutions should train specialists in minority languages and support documentation where transmission is weakening.

A fifth principle is digital equality. Nigeria should treat language datasets, speech corpora, fonts, keyboards, spellcheckers and evaluation benchmarks as shared research infrastructure. Communities should participate in data governance and receive recognition for linguistic contributions. Public procurement can require language technologies to report performance across Nigerian languages instead of presenting English performance as universal.

The fourth conceptual result is that Nigeria can manage inevitable coordination pressures through differentiated, enforceable and community-responsive planning. The goal is not equal use of every language in every domain. The goal is fair access, sustainable development and transparent criteria for assigning functions and resources.

9. DISCUSSION

The results clarify the meaning of inevitability in the title. Linguistic challenges arise repeatedly because language allocation is a continuing part of state-building, education and economic organization. Albaugh's (2014) analysis of African state formation supports this position: governments select languages under constraints of administrative capacity, political legitimacy and educational resources. Nigeria's scale and diversity intensify those constraints. However, the findings also challenge arguments that treat English domination as the only practical solution. English can coordinate national communication, but exclusive reliance on it creates additional costs in literacy, public participation, cultural transmission and digital access.

The analysis agrees with Adegbija (2004), Ugwu (2020) and Owojecho (2020) that Nigeria's central weakness lies in the distance between policy aspiration and institutional practice. The 2022 National Language Policy represents progress because it provides an integrated national framework. Lawani (2025) shows that its implementation guidance recognizes legislation, research, resource development, partnerships and finance. However, the policy will repeat earlier patterns unless institutions convert these areas into assigned duties, measurable standards and budget lines.

Education illustrates why implementation quality matters. Obiakor's (2024) finding that English-taught pupils performed better in the analyzed literacy data complicates simple claims about mother-tongue instruction. The result should encourage contextual design instead of a return to English-only ideology. Eze and Amoniyan (2025) identify teacher preparation and resource shortages that directly affect outcomes. If schools select an indigenous language that learners do not share, provide weak materials and change abruptly to English, the label 'mother-tongue education' does not describe a coherent programme. Planned bilingual education requires language mapping, teacher competence, suitable texts, assessment alignment and a carefully supported transition.

The findings also expose the limits of concentrating policy on three major languages. Senayon (2021) demonstrates that a larger indigenous language can displace a smaller one in education. Ndiribe and Aboh (2022) connect linguistic hierarchy with political marginalization. A fair policy must therefore protect local choice and minority access while supporting wider regional languages. Layered multilingualism offers a stronger model because it assigns functions at different governmental levels and recognizes that citizens possess overlapping repertoires.

Intergenerational transmission deserves equal attention. Uwena and Okafor (2025) and Babatunde and Akinawo (2026) show that schools and educated homes increasingly favor English. These choices reflect real incentives. Cultural campaigns alone cannot reverse them. Indigenous languages need visible educational, occupational, creative and digital value. When children can read stories, use applications, watch high-quality programmes and encounter professional terminology in a language, family transmission gains practical support.

Digital language policy now forms part of national development. The work of Joshi et al. (2020) shows the global concentration of language technology, while Nigerian and African initiatives demonstrate that collaborative data creation can improve representation. Adelani et al. (2025) also caution that systems can erase linguistic difference by treating related varieties as interchangeable. Nigeria should therefore combine national investment with community governance, open research and careful evaluation of dialectal and

code-mixed data. UNESCO's (2025) roadmap reinforces this direction by linking digital multilingualism with public policy, capacity building and community participation.

The health and public-service literature broadens the consequences of language planning. Krystallidou et al. (2021) and Babalola et al. (2025) connect language-concordant communication with comprehension, trust and adherence. Thus, translation and interpretation should form part of service quality. Nigeria's multilingual policy will gain public legitimacy when citizens experience it in hospitals, local government offices, agricultural extension, emergency messages and legal assistance, not only in cultural celebrations.

The theoretical frameworks support these conclusions. Cooper's (1989) approach shows that language planning changes social opportunities, while Hornberger's (2002) ecology shows how domains reinforce one another. Taken together, they explain why a narrow intervention often fails. A textbook project without teacher preparation, a policy without budgets, or a digital dataset without community use cannot alter the wider ecology. Sustainable reform requires connected measures that change both language resources and the rewards attached to their use.

The article therefore rejects two extremes. The first romanticizes multilingualism as an automatic source of unity. Diversity can coexist with exclusion when institutions distribute value unequally. The second treats multilingualism as a burden that only monolingual administration can solve. Monolingual administration does not remove diversity; it shifts adjustment costs to less powerful speakers. A realistic approach accepts recurring coordination pressures and builds institutions capable of managing them fairly.

10. CONCLUSION

Linguistic challenges are inevitable in multilingual societies because institutions must continually select languages for education, administration, public services and technology while populations and repertoires change. Nigeria's difficulties, however, do not follow naturally from the existence of many languages. They arise from unequal status allocation, weak policy implementation, major-minority asymmetry, English-centered opportunity structures, declining family transmission and digital resource disparities. The central contribution of this article is the distinction between unavoidable coordination and preventable exclusion. Nigeria can preserve a shared national language while widening the formal, educational and digital functions of indigenous languages through layered multilingualism, enforceable access standards, functional corpus development, teacher preparation, community transmission and responsible language technology. Diversity will continue to demand negotiation, but fair planning can prevent that negotiation from producing permanent linguistic disadvantage.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Federal Ministry of Education and NERDC should convert the National Language Policy Implementation Guideline into a coasted national programme with defined responsibilities, annual targets and public progress reports. The programme should specify minimum standards for teacher preparation, materials, translation, terminology and digital resources.
2. State governments should conduct periodic language-demand mapping for schools and public services. The mapping should record learners' repertoires, minority-language communities, migration patterns and service needs, thereby allowing states to select realistic language combinations instead of applying one formula to every locality.
3. Teacher-education institutions should establish compulsory preparation in multilingual pedagogy, planned translanguaging, second-language literacy and the teaching of subject terminology across languages. Professional development should combine language proficiency with subject knowledge and classroom assessment.
4. Federal, state and local institutions should adopt language-access standards for health, justice, elections, agriculture and emergency communication. These standards should provide priority translations, trained interpreters, plain-language materials and multilingual media channels according to documented community demand.
5. NERDC, universities, professional associations and language communities should create open terminology banks, corpora, dictionaries and teaching resources for Nigerian languages. Technical development should begin with high-demand domains such as primary education, public health, agriculture, civic information and digital literacy.
6. Government research funds and technology procurement should include measurable Nigerian-language requirements. Publicly funded projects should release reusable datasets where ethical and legal conditions permit, report performance by language and dialect, and involve language communities in data governance.
7. Schools, libraries, broadcasters and cultural organizations should support intergenerational transmission through children's literature, audio-visual content, reading clubs, local-language competitions and family learning resources. Such programmes should present indigenous languages as instruments of present knowledge and creativity, not only as symbols of heritage.
8. The National Assembly and state legislatures should review statutory language clauses so that indigenous-language provisions contain clear duties, timelines and oversight mechanisms. The review should protect minority communities and prevent the replacement of English dominance with domination by only the three largest indigenous languages.

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