NIGERIAN ACADEMY OF EDUCATION (NAE) POSITION ON THE RECENT DECISION TO CANCEL EDUCATION IN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

Taken at the 69TH National Council on Education (NCE) Meeting held at the International Event Centre (DOME) Akure, Ondo State from Monday, 3rd to Thursday 6th November, 2025

SUBMITTED TO THE HON. MINISTER OF EDUCATION,
DR. MORUFU OLATUNJI ALAUSA
FEDERAL MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, ABUJA

Tuesday, 25 November, 2025

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0.0 Executive Summary

The Federal Government has cancelled the National Language Policy (NLP) mandating the use of indigenous languages as the medium of instruction in schools. The Minister of Education, Dr. Morufu Olatunji Alausa, recently pronounced this at the 69th National Council on Education (NCE) held in Akure from 3–6 November 2025, and restated it at the 2025 Language in Education International Conference, organised by the British Council in Abuja on Wednesday, to cancel the National Language Policy (NLP 2022) and designate English as the sole medium of instruction at all levels of education in Nigeria.

In 2022, the Federal Government approved a National Language Policy (NLP), which stipulates that from Early Childhood Education to Primary Six, the language of instruction will be in the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community. The policy aims to promote indigenous languages, recognise their equal status, and improve early childhood learning outcomes, while English remains the official language used in later education and formal settings.

Reasons given by the Honourable Minister for the cancellation include:

‘’1. Nigerian children had been performing abysmally in public exams as a result of being taught in their mother tongue. He fingered mass failure rate in WAEC, NECO, and JAMB in certain geo-political zones of the country, and those are the ones that adopted this mother tongue in an over-subscribed manner.

2. Extensive data analysis and evidence showing that the use of the mother tongue as the primary medium of instruction had negatively impacted learning outcomes in several parts of the country.

3. Using the mother tongue language in Nigeria for the past 15 years has literally destroyed education in certain regions.’’

On the basis of the invitation, by the Honourable Minister of Education, requesting stakeholders with differing views to present verifiable data to

support their positions, adding that the government remained open to evidence-based dialogue that would strengthen the education sector, the Nigerian Academy of Education, as the foremost Association of the heavy weights who are the elite professionals in Education, is responding with an evidence-based position paper in an advisory capacity.

NAE immediately set up a 9-member high-level Task Force to produce this Advisory Response.

The NAE Report, which is a succinct summary of the work of the Task Force, respectfully urges the Honourable Minister to reconsider the decision to cancel mother tongue instruction at the foundational level of education. Our evidence is unequivocal: early education in indigenous languages enhances learning outcomes, strengthens national identity, and supports inclusive development.

We therefore recommend that the Honourable Minister should, as a matter urgency, national pride, national integrity, globally recognised socio-cultural identity and the decolonisation of our mentality:

1) Reverse the cancellation of the National Language Policy,
2) Champion the effective implementation of mother tongue instruction,
3) Mobilise the necessary resources and stakeholder engagement to address existing challenges, and
4) Commit to regular, evidence-based policy reviews that ensure continuous improvement.

By taking decisive action, the Ministry will safeguard Nigeria's educational progress and cultural heritage, ensuring that future generations benefit from a robust and inclusive education system. The Nigerian Academy of Education stands ready to support the Ministry in this vital and other endeavours.

1.0 Introduction

The National Language Policy spanned many years of cautious and painstaking development by the best stakeholders in Nigeria including language experts, educationists, academicians, researchers, administrators, policy makers and representatives of notable professional associations in Nigeria. It was published by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) in 2022 . Under its chapter 3 (Policy Declarations and Statements on Language and Language Status Section 14b, it is unequivocally stated that *"The Policy which shall be reviewed every 10 years shall regulate the coexistence, status and use of Nigerian languages and other languages in the country."*

The recent reversal of Nigeria's policy on the use of indigenous languages as the medium of instruction at the lower levels of education has generated widespread concern. The Nigerian Academy of Education (NAE) views this decision as a significant misstep, influenced by recommendations that appear to disregard established research and historical precedents, such as Babs Fafunwa's 1978 experiment and the Rivers Readers' Project. There is indeed the recent 6-year-research data on the Obolo Bilingual Education Centre (presented at the just concluded International Conference on Language and Inclusion in Education in Abuja), where there is sound evidence on the superior learning (and teaching) that takes place in the OBEC schools as facilitated by the Obolo medium of instruction. These are contained in the personal summary (see page 14), of Dr. Marianne Aaron, an Educationist and a Language and Education Consultant in Nigeria, married to a Nigerian, from the Netherlands (Holland) where the languages of instruction are Dutch and/or Freesian from Kindergarten to secondary, and Dutch also for tertiary education. Dr Aaron, like most of us, learned English as a subject in secondary school.

The Nigeria's educational objectives enshrined in the various versions of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1979;1989; 1999) is

ensuring that there are equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels, including free adult literacy programmes. Thus, the nation has recognised the imperative of literacy in both individual and national development.

The knowledge about good practice in the teaching of literacy and numeracy skills has shown that the use of mother tongue language has been to build on learners' experience, and link literacy exercises to the learners' everyday lives, builds on learners' prior knowledge, help them overcome their fear, and promotes problem solving. It was for this reason, that the policy guidelines for mass literacy, adult and non-formal education (2017: pp 41-45) provides that in the early stages of learning basic skills of reading, writing and numeracy, the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment shall be used. This provision is in line with the dictates of the National Language Policy. Consequently, curriculum, basic literacy primers, and further reading materials. have been developed in at least the three major Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba) in order to facilitate the implementation of this important goal.

As Nigeria struggles with the burden of the large number of non-literate youth and adults and out-of-school children, the decision to cancel the National Language Policy and promote the use of English as the medium of instruction including at the basic levels of education would certainly disrupt the little effort in place for the reduction of adult illiteracy in the country. It is important to appreciate that improving literacy skills amongst our youth and adult population is a key first step in overcoming the obstacles that lock majority of citizens into a cycle of poverty and disadvantage which aggravates the current insecurity situation bedevilling Nigeria. The various initiatives, along with international best practices, consistently demonstrate due reference to, and implementation of related aspects of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the National Policy on Education. They also allude to the benefits of mother tongue instruction in early education.

1.1 Overview of Policy Cancellation

Following the National Council on Education (NCE) meeting in Akure (3–6 November 2025), the Honourable Minister of Education announced several key decisions:

i) Cancellation of the National Language Policy and the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction at all educational levels.

ii) Discontinuation of the policy review process.

iii) Adoption of English as the sole medium of instruction.

iv) Retention of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, as prescribed subjects.

The Minister cited research indicating poor learner performance in regions where mother tongue instruction was implemented, particularly referencing public examination results (WAEC, NECO, JAMB). Claims included negative impacts on learning outcomes and English comprehension, as well as higher failure rates among students taught in indigenous languages.

1.2 Critical Analysis of the Rationale

The NAE identifies several flaws in the reasoning behind the policy reversal:

1. Contradictory Evidence: Research such as the Ife Six-Year Project and the Rivers Readers' Project demonstrate improved academic performance with mother tongue instruction, aligning with international standards.
2. Misattribution of Exam Results: Mother tongue as medium of instruction ends at primary 4. Students sitting for public exams have received years of instruction in English after primary four. Attributing poor performance at senior secondary school external examination to early mother tongue instruction is not evidence based and misleading.

3. Lack of Supporting Data: No concrete evidence was provided to substantiate claims that mother tongue instruction over 15 years has harmed educational outcomes. The policy only prescribes mother tongue instruction up to primary four, after which English is used as the main language of instruction.

The recommendation to cancel the policy overlooks substantial research supporting bilingual and multilingual education and misrepresents the scope and intent of the existing policy.

1.3 Historical and International Context

Mother tongue instruction in Nigeria is supported by scientific, linguistic, and cultural evidence. Influenced by UNESCO's early recommendations, Nigeria's National Policy on Education (since 1977) has consistently endorsed mother tongue instruction in early years. Projects like the Ife Six-Year Primary Project (SYPP) have shown that children educated in their first language develop stronger conceptual understanding and cultural awareness.

Countries such as Japan and China attribute their technological and literacy advancements to early education in the mother tongue. Similarly, Nigeria's 2022 National Language Policy aimed to strengthen implementation of these principles.

1.4 Educational and Cultural Rationale

Mother tongue instruction:

i) Enhances comprehension and cognitive development.

ii) Builds confidence by removing language barriers at earlier stage of life.

iii) Increases participation and supports the acquisition of additional languages.

iv) Fosters cultural identity and social inclusion.

v) Reduces dropout and repetition rates.

vi) Enables greater parental involvement in education and indirectly encouraging school enrolment at early stage of life.

vii) Enhances the provision of adult and youth literacy.

viii) Fosters patriotism, cultural heritage and promotion of national pride.

1.5 Theoretical Foundations

Educational theories underpinning mother tongue instruction include:

1) Cummins' Linguistic Interdependence Theory: Skills developed in the first language transfer to the second language, supporting overall academic achievement.

2) Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory: Learning is optimised through social interaction in a familiar language, promoting active participation and clearer communication.

3) Jegede's Theory of Collateral Learning: Explains how non-Western learners attempt to cope within a classroom environment not very receptive to their indigenous knowledge.

These theories, amongst many others, are reflected in Nigerian states where early grade reading in local languages leads to better English proficiency and classroom engagement.

1.6 Empirical Support

Research by UNESCO and Nigerian scholars (Fafunwa(1969,1989), Bamgbose (1977,1984), Omamor (1982), Ubahakwe (1982) consistently found that pupils taught in a familiar language learn faster, understand better, and achieve superior academic results, including in English.

1.7 Comparative Practices Form Around the Globe

Many multilingual African countries maintain mother tongue instruction in early education:

1) Ghana: Local languages used through primary 3, then English.

2) South Africa: Mother tongue for the first three years, with a second language from Grade 3.

3) Kenya, Ethiopia, Botswana, Uganda, The Gambia, Madagascar: Similar models, transitioning to English in later years.

Internationally, countries such as Pakistan, Finland, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, and Spain also support indigenous language instruction, reinforcing its effectiveness and cultural value.

1.8 Recommendations

The Nigerian Academy of Education (NAE) strongly advises against the cancellation of mother tongue instruction and proposes the following detailed recommendations to ensure effective language policy implementation and improved educational outcomes:

1.8.1 . Reinstate and Strengthen Mother Tongue Instruction

i) Immediate Reversal: The government should promptly reverse the cancellation of the National Language Policy and reaffirm its commitment to mother tongue instruction at the foundational level.

ii) Policy Clarity: Clearly communicate the scope of the policy, emphasising that mother tongue instruction is intended for the first four years of formal education, with a gradual transition to English from primary five.

1.8.2. Address Implementation Challenges

i) Increased Funding: Allocate dedicated resources to support the development and distribution of teaching materials in indigenous languages. Language laboratories and attendant infrastructure are needed.

ii) Teacher Training: Invest in comprehensive training programmes for teachers to enhance their proficiency in both indigenous languages and bilingual teaching methodologies.

iii) Orthography Development: Support linguistic research and the development of standardised orthographies for all major Nigerian languages to facilitate effective instruction and material creation.

iv) Material Production: Encourage the production and dissemination of high-quality textbooks, primers, readers, and digital resources in local languages.

1.8.3. Continuous Monitoring and Evaluation

i) Regular Assessment: Establish robust mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of mother tongue instruction, including periodic reviews of student performance and learning outcomes.

ii) Data-Driven Adjustments: Use empirical data to inform policy adjustments, ensuring that interventions are responsive to on-the-ground realities and regional differences.

1.8.4. Community and Parental Engagement

i) Awareness Campaigns: Launch public awareness initiatives to educate parents and communities about the benefits of mother tongue instruction for cognitive development and academic achievement.

ii) Parental Involvement: Foster active parental participation in early education by providing guidance and resources that enable parents to support learning at home in their native languages.

1.8.5. Inclusive Policy Review

i) Stakeholder Consultation: Involve educators, linguists, community leaders, and other stakeholders in regular policy reviews to ensure the policy remains relevant and effective.

ii) Ten-Year Review Cycle: Rather than abrupt cancellation, conduct a comprehensive review of the policy after ten years of consistent implementation, using evidence from national and international best practices.

1.8.6. Promote Multilingualism and National Unity

i) Balanced Language Policy: Encourage the learning of English, French and other Nigerian languages as subjects, promoting multilingual proficiency and fostering national cohesion.

ii) Cultural Preservation: Recognise and celebrate Nigeria's linguistic diversity as a national asset, integrating cultural content into the curriculum to strengthen identity , social inclusion and multicultural education.

1.8.7. Leverage Technology

i) Digital Platforms: Invest in digital learning platforms and educational technology that support instruction in indigenous languages, expanding access to quality resources in both urban and rural areas.

2.0 Conclusion and Call to Action

The Nigerian Academy of Education respectfully urges the Honourable Minister to reconsider the decision to cancel mother tongue instruction at the foundational level of education. The evidence is unequivocal: early education in indigenous languages enhances learning outcomes, strengthens national identity, and supports inclusive development.

We therefore call upon the Honourable Minister to:

5) Reverse the cancellation of the National Language Policy,
6) Champion the effective implementation of mother tongue instruction,
7) Mobilise the necessary resources and stakeholder engagement to address existing challenges, and
8) Commit to regular, evidence-based policy reviews that ensure continuous improvement.

By taking decisive action, the Ministry will safeguard Nigeria's educational progress and cultural heritage, ensuring that future generations benefit from a robust and inclusive education system. If the policy is let go without a robust interrogation, the permanent recolonisation of Nigeria and the burial of its future and pride would have been completed. The FME owes multi-ethnic Nigeria and its culturally rich people robust explanation for the cancellation of the policy.

The Nigerian Academy of Education stands ready to support the Ministry in this and other vital endeavours.

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Personal communication

I am Dr. Marianne Aaron, an Educationist and a Language and Education Consultant in Nigeria, married to a Nigerian, from the Netherlands (Holland) where the languages of instruction are Dutch and/or Freesian from Kindergarten to secondary, and Dutch also for tertiary education. I learned English as a subject in secondary school.

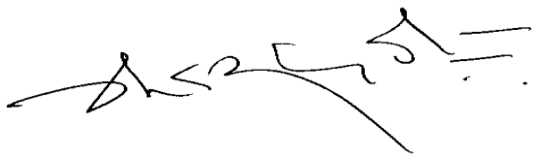
I attended the just concluded International Conference on Language and Inclusion in Education in Abuja, where the Minister of Education shocked us by addressing us at the beginning of the conference with his negative stance towards Nigerian languages as languages of instruction in education. There were Educationists from India , Ethiopia, and Pakistan present and giving presentations to assist us in Nigeria to learn from their longer experience for the implementation of our language policy in education. I myself presented on the Obolo Bilingual Education Centre where there is sound evidence on the superior learning (and teaching) that takes place in the OBEC schools as facilitated by the Obolo medium of instruction, the language of the immediate environment. In thIs model of education, English is taught as a subject from primary one, but all other subjects are taught with textbooks in Obolo. I presented data from the longitudinal study, now in its' sixth year, following up OBEC primary six graduates in their respective secondary schools. We considered their school results in English Language and found that the total average results of the first two batches of these students in Senior Secondary School are 63% in SS1 and 60% in SS2, while in their Junior Secondary Schools (UBE), their batch averages were above 70%. In their BECE exams they scored higher than the students who had gone through other primary schools, both private and public, scoring A (15 students), B (5 students) and only one C (lower credit). So what about the Minister's claim that mother tongue-based bilingual education doesn't work? These OBEC results for English are as expected from the earlier Stocktaking research of language in education in Africa by UNESCO, reported in 2006 and 2011.

From the Archives

In June 1924, Oladipo Felix Solanke became the first African to speak live on radio. He spoke in Yoruba to inspire Nigerian students in London

to embrace their language. He understood that language shapes thought, identity, and culture.

UNESCO research shows children learn faster, retain more, and think critically when taught in their mother tongue. Across Africa, students taught in local languages outperform those taught exclusively in foreign languages. English opens doors globally, but replacing Yoruba in education risks weakening comprehension, engagement, and cultural identity.



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