Concrescence: Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Research
Vol. 2, No. 5, 2025, ISSN: 1595-9287

The Negative Perception of English and its Relevance in Nigeria's Diverse Society

Oyinlade Morenike Busayo
Directorate of General Studies,
Ekiti State College of Health Sciences and Technology,
Ijero Ekiti,
Morejoy37@gmail.com

Abstract
The English language occupies a complex position in Nigeria, marked by both negative perceptions and undeniable significance within its diverse society. The prevailing negative attitudes toward English can be traced to a range of historical, cultural, and sociopolitical factors. There has been a growing discourse against the dominance of the English language in Nigeria, with claims that it poses a threat to indigenous languages. This paper examines the factors that have contributed to the negative perception of English in Nigeria, while acknowledging its undeniable importance as a catalyst for national development. The study reviews existing discussions of the current challenges posed by English's dominant status and emphasises its critical role in Nigeria's heterogeneous society. Given Nigeria's linguistic diversity, the study suggests we should view English as a valuable asset rather than a hindrance to Nigerian cultural values. Ultimately, this work concludes that while English is deeply intertwined with historical complexities and cultural challenges, it remains vital for the nation's cohesion and development. Finding a balance between preserving indigenous languages and the practical advantages of English is essential to Nigeria's linguistic and cultural future.

Keywords: English language, lingua franca, disparaging, cultural values, heterogeneous, Nigeria

Introduction

Language is both a tool of communication and a carrier of culture. In multilingual societies like Nigeria, language serves not only to convey meaning but also to shape identity, power relations, and social inclusion. The dominance of English in Nigeria traces back to British colonial rule, which established the language as the medium of governance, education, and commerce. Decades after independence, English continues to serve as Nigeria's official language and the primary means of interethnic communication, yet its role remains a subject of controversy. This controversy stems from the ambivalent nature of English in Nigeria's sociolinguistic context. On the one hand, it symbolises modernity, global connection, and intellectual prestige. On the other hand, it embodies colonial oppression and cultural displacement (Bamgbose, 1995; Adegbija, 2004). For many Nigerians, proficiency in English determines social mobility, educational success, and access to employment, but it simultaneously reinforces inequality between the educated elite and speakers of indigenous languages.

Vol. 2, No. 5, 2025, ISSN: 1595-9287

The negative perception of English is therefore rooted in historical, cultural, and psychological dimensions. During the colonial era, English was strategically positioned as a superior language of civilisation, while indigenous languages were relegated to domestic or informal use. This linguistic hierarchy persists today and continues to manifest in language attitudes, policy decisions, and educational practices (Igboanusi, 2002). Many Nigerians view English as necessary and alien, simultaneously empowering and alienating. The issue is further complicated by Nigeria's linguistic diversity, with over 500 indigenous languages spoken across major ethno-linguistic groups, including Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa (Emenanjo, 1990). While English serves as a lingua franca that bridges these groups, it also threatens the survival of smaller local languages, leading to what some scholars describe as linguistic erosion (Owolabi, 2012). The struggle to balance the practical benefits of English with the need to preserve indigenous languages forms the central dilemma of Nigeria's language situation. This paper, therefore, argues that the negative perception of English in Nigeria does not stem merely from linguistic prejudice but from deeper socio-historical tensions. The aim is not to condemn English but to analyse its ambivalent role as both a bridge and a barrier, a symbol of unity and division. The study seeks to explore three central issues:

i. The historical factors that shaped the rise of English in Nigeria.
ii. The criticisms and negative perceptions associated with its dominance, and
iii. The ongoing efforts to balance English usage with the preservation of indigenous languages.

In addressing these questions, this paper contributes to broader debates on language policy, identity, and postcolonial development in Africa. It emphasises that linguistic diversity is not a weakness but a cultural resource that can coexist with English through deliberate educational and cultural strategies.

Historical Background and Colonial Legacy

The story of English in Nigeria cannot be told without reference to the colonial enterprise, which embedded linguistic domination within broader political and cultural subjugation. The British introduced English formally in the 19th century, first through trade, missionary activity, and education along the coastal regions, and later through administrative expansion into the hinterland. Initially, English was the language of commerce and Christian evangelism, but it soon became the language of power, determining who could access Western education, employment, and social mobility (Bamgbose, 1995; Adegbija, 2004).

i. Early Introduction through Missionary Education

Missionary groups, including the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM), and the Wesleyan Methodist Mission, established the first formal schools in the mid-19th century. They aimed to convert indigenous populations and train local catechists, teachers, and interpreters. English was adopted as the primary medium of instruction because it allowed missionaries to access Western pedagogical materials and to promote what they perceived as "civilised" values (Ajayi, 1965). However, this policy implicitly devalued indigenous languages, relegating them to domestic and informal use. As a result, English became associated with intelligence, progress, and moral superiority, a view that would persist long after independence (Ogunmodimu, 2015). The early English-educated elite, such as Herbert Macaulay and Nnamdi Azikiwe**,** emerged from missionary schools and utilised English as a means of political expression and nationalist advocacy. Thus, English played a paradoxical role: while it functioned as a colonial tool of control**,** it also became a medium for anti-colonial resistance and national awakening (Adegbite, 2013).

ii. **The Colonial Administration and Language Hierarchies**

With the consolidation of British colonial rule in 1914 under Lord Lugard, English became the official language of administration. It served as the unifying medium for a linguistically diverse population, yet it entrenched a hierarchy in which English speakers occupied positions of privilege. Fluency in English became synonymous with education, power, and "modern civilisation" (Igboanusi, 2002). This linguistic elitism divided society into two broad classes: the English-speaking elite and the majority who were linguistically marginalised. According to Phillipson (1992), this process exemplifies linguistic imperialism, in which language becomes an instrument of domination that perpetuates dependency and inequality. The Nigerian colonial state institutionalised this form of linguistic inequality by mandating English in schools, courts, and government offices, effectively suppressing indigenous linguistic identities.

iii. **The Postcolonial Transition**

Following Nigeria's independence in 1960, English retained its status as the official language due to its perceived neutrality among the country's numerous ethnic groups and its utility in administration and global communication. The early postcolonial leaders justified this choice as pragmatic, arguing that no single indigenous language could serve as a lingua franca for all Nigerians (Bamgbose, 1995). However, the continuation of English reinforced colonial-era power structures, producing what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) describes as the "colonisation of the mind." Many Nigerians began to internalise linguistic hierarchies, viewing English as the only legitimate medium for intellectual discourse and socioeconomic progress, while relegating indigenous languages to informal or "uneducated" spaces. This resulted in the erosion of linguistic self-esteem and the gradual marginalisation of mother tongues in education and governance. At the same time, English underwent localisation, evolving into what scholars call Nigerian English, a variety that reflects local idioms, culture, and pragmatic realities (Banjo, 1996). Through this process of indigenisation, Nigerians appropriated English, transforming it from an alien imposition into a functional tool for expressing local realities. As Adegbite (2013) observes, "the Nigerianization of English is both an act of linguistic survival and an assertion of identity." The linguistic landscape today reflects a hybrid identity in which English is domesticated but still dominates, and in which indigenous languages survive but are increasingly threatened by neglect and globalisation. The colonial legacy of English in Nigeria is therefore twofold: it has created a powerful medium of communication and unity, while simultaneously entrenching social and linguistic hierarchies. Understanding this dual legacy is essential for addressing the ongoing ambivalence toward English in Nigeria's sociocultural and educational spaces.

Criticisms of English in Nigeria

The debate over the role of English in Nigeria is not merely linguistic; it is deeply ideological, cultural, and political in nature. While English serves as the country's unifying medium of communication, scholars have repeatedly criticised its dominance for entrenching inequality, displacing indigenous languages, and perpetuating colonial patterns of thought. The criticism of English in Nigeria, therefore, centres on the tension between its instrumental utility and its symbolic burden.

i. Cultural and Identity Loss

A central criticism of English in Nigeria is its role in contributing to cultural alienation and the erosion of identity. Many scholars argue that the continued dominance of English represents a subtle continuation of colonial domination, a phenomenon that Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) famously termed the "linguistic bomb," which fragments African consciousness. According to Ngũgĩ, the imposition of a foreign language displaces

indigenous epistemologies, alienating people from their cultural roots. In Nigeria, this alienation manifests in the gradual erosion of local languages and oral traditions. Younger generations are increasingly adopting English as their first language, abandoning their native languages. The result, as Adegbite (2003) notes, is a "cultural dislocation" in which Nigerians express their thoughts in a language that often lacks the metaphoric richness and emotional depth of their native languages. Similarly, Bamgbose (1995) warns that this linguistic shift risks the loss of cultural continuity, as proverbs, folktales, and idioms, essential repositories of indigenous wisdom, lose their relevance. Language carries a worldview, and when English dominates public and educational discourse, indigenous perspectives are marginalised. This contributes to what Owolabi (2012) calls the "psychological colonisation" of the African mind, a dependency on Western linguistic and intellectual paradigms even in local contexts. Moreover, the association of English with education, civilisation, and intelligence has reinforced a hierarchy of languages that devalues Nigerian tongues. Igboanusi (2008) notes that many parents, even in rural areas, deliberately speak English to their children to signal social advancement, believing that mastery of the Language ensures a better future. Consequently, intergenerational transmission of indigenous languages declines, leading to linguistic attrition and the endangerment of minority languages (Emenanjo, 1990). This form of cultural displacement aligns with postcolonial linguistic theory**,** which views language as both a site of domination and a site of resistance. English, in this sense, functions as a double agent, simultaneously a means of global connection and a vehicle of cultural loss.

ii. Linguistic Inequality and Elitism

Another major criticism concerns the sociolinguistic inequality that English perpetuates. In Nigeria, proficiency in English determines access to education, employment, and social mobility. Those fluent in English belong to the elite class, while those who are not are often excluded from opportunities. This stratification reinforces the colonial legacy of linguistic elitism. As Afolayan (1985) points out, Nigeria's dependence on English has created a "two-tier linguistic society," with the English-speaking elite controlling political and economic institutions, and the majority remaining linguistically marginalised. This hierarchy is evident in schools, where English is both the medium and measure of intelligence. Pupils who fail English in national examinations are automatically denied admission into higher education, regardless of their performance in other subjects (Taiwo, 2020). Phillipson's (1992) theory of linguistic imperialism helps explain this inequality. He argues that postcolonial societies internalise the superiority of colonial languages, thereby perpetuating dependency and underdevelopment. In Nigeria, this imperialism is evident in the preference for English in official communication, academic publishing, and even religious activities, while local languages are confined to informal domains.

The result is a sociolinguistic structure that privileges urban elites and marginalises rural populations. According to Igboanusi and Ohia (2020), this inequality undermines the principles of democracy and inclusiveness, as political participation often requires proficiency in the English language. Thus, English functions not merely as a language of communication but as a marker of class, power, and privilege. This dynamic raises ethical and educational concerns about equity. If national integration and development are to be achieved, language policy must ensure that linguistic competence does not become a barrier to participation. As Bamgbose (2011) observes, "no country develops by rejecting its linguistic identity while embracing another's."

Vol. 2, No. 5, 2025, ISSN: 1595-9287

iii. Educational and Policy Contradictions

The criticisms of English are also tied to educational policy contradictions in Nigeria. The National Policy on Education (FRN, 2014) recognises the importance of mother-tongue instruction at the early stages of education, yet implementation remains weak. Schools overwhelmingly use English as the medium of instruction from the primary level, contrary to the policy's intent. This dissonance has practical and psychological consequences. Many pupils struggle to grasp foundational concepts because they are taught in a language they do not fully understand. As Adegbite (2013) notes, overreliance on English in early education leads to *rote learning* rather than genuine comprehension. Research by Taiwo (2020) confirms that students taught in their native language exhibit higher levels of engagement and cognitive development.

Furthermore, the prioritisation of English in assessment systems discourages bilingual education. Students are conditioned to equate linguistic competence with English fluency, thereby undermining the value of indigenous languages. This imbalance contributes to low literacy levels and poor educational outcomes, particularly in rural communities. At the policy level, the government's failure to promote multilingual education perpetuates inequality. The rhetoric of linguistic diversity is celebrated in principle but ignored in practice. As Oyetade (1992) argues, "Nigeria's language policy is progressive in formulation but regressive in implementation." Without genuine investment in indigenous language development, including translation of textbooks, teacher training, and curriculum adaptation, English will continue to dominate to the detriment of linguistic diversity.

Despite these arguments, it is essential to note that English also serves a pragmatic purpose in Nigeria's complex sociolinguistic landscape. For many, it is not an imperial imposition but a practical solution to ethnic and linguistic fragmentation. The argument, therefore, does not call for rejection of English but for its recontextualization. Scholars such as Banjo (1996) and Adegbija (2004) propose that English can coexist with indigenous languages if redefined as "a shared resource rather than a colonial inheritance. Thus, the challenge is not English itself, but the unequal structures surrounding its use. Nigeria's task is to transform English from an instrument of domination into a tool of inclusion, one that respects and reflects its multicultural environment.

The Relevance of English in Nigeria's Diverse Society

Despite the strong arguments against English for perpetuating colonial dominance and linguistic inequality, the language remains an indispensable feature of Nigeria's national life. It serves as the principal medium of communication, education, governance, and globalisation, making it an important factor in Nigeria's socio-economic development. Scholars have therefore described English in Nigeria as both a burden and a blessing, a burden because of its colonial origins, and a blessing because of its unifying and utilitarian value (Bamgbose, 1995; Adegbite, 2013). The relevance of English in Nigeria will be examined under four interrelated domains: national integration, education and academia, socioeconomic and technological advancement, and globalisation and diplomacy.

i. English as a Tool for National Integration

Nigeria's linguistic diversity, with over 500 indigenous languages and numerous dialects, presents significant challenges to interethnic communication and nation-building (Emenanjo, 1990). In this context, English has served as a neutral linguistic bridge, enabling interaction among groups divided by ethnicity and culture. The language serves as a platform for governance, commerce, and the formation of national identity, thereby helping sustain social cohesion in a plural society. According to Bamgbose (2003), the adoption of English as Nigeria's official language was not merely a colonial carryover but a pragmatic

Vol. 2, No. 5, 2025, ISSN: 1595-9287

necessity. No indigenous language could serve effectively as a national lingua franca without alienating others. English thus functions as a *centripetal force*, facilitating administrative efficiency and reducing interethnic tension. Similarly, Adegbite (2013) notes that the Nigerian state depends on English for national administration, legal proceedings, and the dissemination of government policies. It is the language of parliamentary debate, legislation, and judicial interpretation. Without a common language, Nigeria's governance process would be fragmented along linguistic and ethnic lines. Hence, English acts as a stabilising agent in a country with profound cultural and linguistic heterogeneity.

Furthermore, English enhances access to mass communication through print, broadcast, and digital media. Newspapers such as The Guardian *and* Vanguard, and broadcast stations like the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA*)*, rely on English to reach national audiences. This nationwide reach underscores English's centrality in maintaining a shared communicative framework across regions and ethnicities.

ii. English in Education and Academic Development

Education is perhaps the most significant domain in which English exerts its influence. Since colonial times, English has been the medium of instruction at all levels of education in Nigeria, from secondary to tertiary institutions. It remains the principal language for textbooks, examinations, and academic discourse (Taiwo, 2020). While this dominance has generated debate, its practicality cannot be denied. The multiplicity of indigenous languages poses serious logistical challenges for developing a unified curriculum and instructional materials. English, therefore, functions as a linguistic equaliser, providing access to scientific, technical, and literary knowledge produced globally (Adegbija, 2004). According to Bamiro (2006), English enables Nigerian students and scholars to participate in the international academic community, contributing to and benefiting from global research networks. Similarly, Ogu (1992) argues that English proficiency facilitates Nigeria's intellectual participation in global forums, allowing its universities to collaborate internationally.

However, the role of English in education goes beyond utility; it also fosters cognitive flexibility through bilingual and multilingual competence. Studies by Afolayan (1985) and Taiwo (2020) demonstrate that Nigerian students proficient in both English and their mother tongue often outperform monolingual peers in critical reasoning and literacy development. This underscores the potential for balanced bilingualism, where English complements rather than replaces indigenous languages. Nonetheless, scholars such as Emenanjo (1990) caution that English must not eclipse the pedagogical importance of local languages in foundational learning. Instead, a trilingual model incorporating English, a regional lingua franca (Hausa, Yoruba, or Igbo), and the mother tongue can create a more inclusive educational framework.

iii. English and Socioeconomic Development

The relevance of English in Nigeria also extends to economic participation, employment, and technological advancement. Proficiency in English is often a prerequisite for employment in both the public and private sectors. It enables Nigerians to engage in transnational business, digital innovation, and information technology fields where English dominates global communication (Owolabi, 2012). In multinational corporations, English serves as the operational language, bridging cross-border teams and facilitating knowledge transfer. For instance, industries such as telecommunications, oil and gas, banking, and information technology depend on English for documentation, training, and international correspondence.

Vol. 2, No. 5, 2025, ISSN: 1595-9287

According to Adegbite (2013), English serves as a marker of socioeconomic mobility, enabling individuals to access global markets, education, and migration opportunities. The language also supports Nigeria's creative economy, including literature, music, and film, where Nigerian English and *Nigerian Pidgin* have become cultural exports. The global success of authors like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the popularity of Afrobeats demonstrate how English, adapted to Nigerian idioms, projects a hybrid cultural identity that resonates globally. Thus, rather than viewing English as purely alien, many Nigerians have appropriated and indigenized it, turning it into a vehicle for self-expression and cultural innovation. As Bamgbose (1995) notes, "the Nigerianization of English reflects the people's creative resilience transforming an imposed language into a localised instrument of empowerment."

iv. English and Globalisation

In the era of globalisation, English occupies a dominant position in international diplomacy, technology, and academic exchange. Nigeria's participation in the United Nations, the Commonwealth, and global trade organisations depends primarily on English as the medium of negotiation and representation. According to Pennycook (2017), the globalisation of English should not be viewed simply as linguistic imperialism but as a complex process of linguistic hybridity, in which non-native users reshape the language to reflect their realities. Nigeria exemplifies this trend through varieties such as Nigerian English and Nigerian Pidgin English, both of which demonstrate creative domestication of the language for local needs (Banjo, 1996).

This hybridisation, or what Canagarajah (2013) calls *"*translingual practice*,"* allows Nigerians to operate confidently in both local and global contexts. English thus becomes a medium through which Nigeria negotiates its modern identity, rooted in tradition but open to global exchange. Moreover, English enables Nigeria's global competitiveness in education, technology, and diplomacy. Universities such as the University of Ibadan, Obafemi Awolowo University, and the University of Lagos publish internationally in English language journals, ensuring Nigeria's visibility in global scholarship (Bamiro, 2006). Hence, English has become not merely a colonial remnant but a strategic resource in the 21st century. This language enables Nigeria to participate meaningfully in global discourse while retaining local identity through creative adaptation.

The Pragmatic Value of English

The continuing relevance of English in Nigeria thus rests on pragmatic necessity rather than ideological submission. As Adegbite (2013) observes, English in Nigeria has evolved from a symbol of colonial domination into a functional lingua franca. It no longer represents foreign control but serves as a locally owned instrument of communication and development. However, the true challenge lies in ensuring that English coexists with indigenous languages within a balanced linguistic ecology. Policies should emphasise additive bilingualism where learning English does not subtract from one's native language but enriches it (Bamgbose, 2011). Only through such a balance can Nigeria maintain its cultural integrity while leveraging the advantages of English for national progress. The continued dominance of English in Nigeria cannot be understood merely as a legacy of colonialism but must be viewed through the lens of pragmatic adaptation and sociolinguistic necessity**.** English has become entrenched not because it is ideologically superior, but because it performs essential communicative, economic, and educational functions that no single indigenous language can yet fulfil on a national scale. This pragmatic value situates English as a *functional necessity* in Nigeria's plural linguistic ecology, a "language of convenience" rather than of cultural conquest (Adegbite, 2013; Bamgbose, 2003).

Vol. 2, No. 5, 2025, ISSN: 1595-9287

i. English as a Functional Necessity

Nigeria's linguistic diversity makes it nearly impossible to adopt one indigenous language as the sole national medium without marginalising others. Attempts to elevate Hausa, Yoruba, or Igbo to this status have consistently been met with resistance due to the country's deep-seated ethnic sensitivities (Emenanjo, 1990). English, as an "impartial" language not belonging to any ethnic group, provides a neutral communicative bridge. Bamgbose (1995) asserts that this neutrality gives English a centripetal role, uniting a linguistically fragmented nation. Hence, its relevance is not based on cultural prestige but on functional indispensability. This makes English a *lingua franca by necessity*, a pragmatic solution to Nigeria's enduring problem of ethnic pluralism and linguistic fragmentation. Moreover, in an increasingly interconnected world, English offers Nigerian's access to global knowledge systems and international cooperation. As Ogu (1992) observes, Nigeria's participation in global science, technology, and diplomacy depends on its command of English, which serves as the world's primary language of research, innovation, and commerce.

ii. From Colonial Tool to Local Instrument

One of the most significant sociolinguistic developments of the postcolonial era is the indigenisation or "Nigerianization" of English. Over the decades, Nigerians have transformed English from a symbol of foreign domination into a medium for authentic self-expression. The emergence of Nigerian English and Nigerian Pidgin English demonstrates this linguistic adaptation, reflecting how English has been localised to suit indigenous communicative norms, idioms, and sociocultural realities (Banjo, 1996; Bamiro, 2006). This phenomenon aligns with what Canagarajah (2013) calls translingual practice, where speakers creatively negotiate meaning across linguistic boundaries, reshaping English into a culturally grounded tool. In this sense, English in Nigeria is no longer "the Queen's English," but a living, dynamic language that carries the rhythm of Nigerian life. It incorporates local proverbs, code-switching, and pragmatic structures that reflect Nigerian identity and worldview. As Adegbite (2013) notes, this domestication process signifies a shift from linguistic dependency to linguistic ownership. The same English that once alienated Nigerians from their culture has been retooled as an agent of creativity and inclusion. Through literature, film, and everyday speech, Nigerians have redefined English as "a voice of our experience," as Achebe (1965) described it: "a new English, altered to suit new surroundings."

iii. English and Inclusive Bilingualism

While English remains indispensable, it need not displace indigenous languages. The pragmatic approach requires fostering additive bilingualism, in which both English and local languages coexist in a mutually reinforcing relationship (Bamgbose, 2011). This differs from subtractive bilingualism, where learning a foreign language leads to the erosion of the first language. In Nigeria, additive bilingualism can be achieved through deliberate educational and cultural policies that ensure English functions as a second language of mobility. In contrast, indigenous languages remain the first languages of identity. Adegbija (2004) advocates a complementary model in which English serves instrumental goals (education, commerce, technology), and indigenous languages preserve cultural continuity and local epistemologies.

This dual orientation reflects what Emenanjo (1990) calls "functional multilingualism": a language ecology in which each language is assigned a distinct communicative domain. Under such a model, English operates in national and global spheres, while indigenous languages dominate domestic, cultural, and regional settings. Thus, the pragmatic value of English lies not in replacing local tongues but in coexisting with them. The challenge for

Vol. 2, No. 5, 2025, ISSN: 1595-9287

Nigeria is to institutionalise balance, valuing English for its global benefits while affirming indigenous languages as vessels of cultural heritage.

iv. English as a Tool for Global Empowerment

Beyond national utility, English serves as Nigeria's passport to the global stage. It enables participation in international diplomacy, academia, and digital innovation. Pennycook (2017) cautions against viewing globalisation solely as linguistic imperialism; rather, it should be understood as linguistic hybridity, a space where local speakers reshape global languages to express their realities. In this sense, English empowers Nigerians to project their voices globally. From the global success of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novels to the global reach of Nigerian film and music, English has become a platform for cultural exportation. Through English, Nigerian expressions such as "japa", "Naija spirit," "wahala," and "long leg" have entered global English lexicons, signalling linguistic reciprocity rather than one-way domination (Bamiro, 2006). Thus, English in Nigeria has evolved from an imposed language to a negotiated and hybridised identity marker. Its pragmatic value lies precisely in this fluidity, its capacity to serve both local and global ends without erasing indigenous linguistic essence.

Balancing English and Indigenous Languages in Nigeria

The challenge facing Nigeria is not whether to retain or reject English but how to balance it with the preservation and development of indigenous languages. The question has evolved from ideology to functionality: how can English coexist with Nigeria's multilingual realities without suppressing native languages or cultural identity? Scholars argue that sustainable language policy must promote bilingualism and multilingualism in education, governance, and national life (Adegbija, 2004; Bamgbose, 2011). A balanced approach should integrate English as a tool of global participation while strengthening indigenous languages as foundations of cultural identity, community development, and cognitive growth. Nigeria's complex multilingual landscape requires a holistic understanding of how English and indigenous languages interact across education, policy, culture, and identity. As the nation continues to navigate the demands of globalisation alongside the preservation of its rich linguistic heritage, it becomes essential to examine the need for balance, the role of bilingual education, the effectiveness of language policies, the influence of the media, and the imperative to reclaim linguistic identity. The following sub-sections explore these key dimensions in detail:

i. The Need for Balance

Nigeria's linguistic situation represents both strength and a vulnerability. With over 500 indigenous languages, diversity has enriched the nation's cultural heritage but also complicated communication, education, and governance (Emenanjo, 1990). English emerged as the neutral medium connecting these linguistic communities, yet its dominance has overshadowed the practical use and transmission of local languages.

As Adegbite (2013) notes, this imbalance threatens Nigeria's linguistic ecology by encouraging linguistic shift, the process by which speakers abandon their native tongues for a more prestigious language. The solution lies in redefining linguistic power relations, positioning English not as a master language but as a partner language. This shift can be achieved through inclusive policies that elevate indigenous languages alongside English across education, media, and governance.

ii. Bilingual Education and Additive Multilingualism

A sustainable balance requires a firm bilingual or multilingual education policy. Empirical studies across Africa have shown that learners achieve higher cognitive and literacy outcomes when early education is conducted in their mother tongue before transitioning to

Vol. 2, No. 5, 2025, ISSN: 1595-9287

English (UNESCO, 2003; Taiwo, 2020). The National Policy on Education (FRN, 2014) already supports mother tongue instruction at the lower primary level, but implementation remains inconsistent. Schools, particularly private and urban ones, often introduce English from the first year, driven by the perception that English proficiency signals superior education. This trend undermines the linguistic and cultural confidence of children and marginalises indigenous literacy. To reverse this, Nigeria must adopt additive bilingualism, in which English is introduced as a second language of mobility while indigenous languages remain the first languages of identity (Bamgbose, 2011). This model ensures that learning English enriches, rather than erases, local linguistic competence. It should include:

i. Developing textbooks and instructional materials in major Nigerian languages;
ii. Training teachers in bilingual pedagogy; and
iii. Incorporating local cultural content into curricula.

Such an approach aligns with UNESCO's (2003) advocacy for "Education for All through Multilingual Education (MLE)", emphasising linguistic inclusivity as a human right.

iii. Language Policy Reform and Implementation

Effective balance cannot occur without robust policy implementation. Nigeria's current language policy remains largely declarative, ambitious on paper but weak in execution (Oyetade, 1992). A reformed framework should:

a. Institutionalise Indigenous Language Use in Governance: Legislative sessions, public broadcasts, and civic education should include translations in major Nigerian languages (Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, and selected regional tongues). This democratizes access to political information and fosters national inclusion.
b. Decentralise Language Planning: Rather than imposing a uniform national policy, regional education boards should develop localised models reflecting the dominant languages of each area.
c. Invest in Linguistic Technology: Government agencies and universities should support the creation of digital dictionaries, translation software, and literacy apps for indigenous languages. This ensures that local tongues evolve with the digital age rather than becoming obsolete.
d. Encourage Indigenous Scholarship: Academic journals and media platforms should accept and promote research published in Nigerian languages to validate their intellectual value (Adegbite, 2013).

By institutionalising these reforms, Nigeria would move toward a functional multilingualism model in which each language occupies a meaningful communicative domain.

iv. The Role of Media and Popular Culture

The Nigerian media and creative industries have become powerful tools for linguistic balance. Indigenous language films, radio programs, and literature promote local identity while leveraging English to reach a broader audience. The rise of Nollywood and bilingual broadcasting illustrates how local languages can coexist with English in global communication. For example, Yoruba and Hausa films with English subtitles circulate internationally, promoting both linguistic diversity and international visibility. Similarly, Nigerian musicians such as Burna Boy and Asa blend English with Yoruba and Pidgin, creating hybrid linguistic expressions that appeal to both local and international audiences.

This cultural synthesis demonstrates that language balance need not be institutional, but it can emerge organically through cultural production. As Canagarajah (2013) and Pennycook (2017) argue, linguistic hybridity allows speakers to draw creatively from multiple codes, redefining linguistic power from the grassroots.

v. Reclaiming Linguistic Identity

Balancing English and indigenous languages is ultimately about reclaiming linguistic dignity. Owolabi (2012) stresses that language embodies worldview, values, and heritage. When indigenous languages lose prestige, communities lose their sense of belonging and epistemological grounding. Nigeria's future linguistic policy must therefore focus on decolonising language consciousness, not by rejecting English, but by recognising that true modernisation is multilingual. As Bamgbose (2011) notes, "no nation can develop fully on borrowed tongues; development must speak its people's language."

This reclamation begins with attitude change: valuing mother-tongue proficiency as intellectual strength rather than inferiority. The goal is to produce citizens who are linguistically flexible, equally comfortable engaging with global discourse in English and expressing indigenous thought in native languages.

vi. Towards a Harmonious Linguistic Future

The coexistence of English and indigenous languages does not signify conflict but linguistic complementarity. English provides access to global networks, while local languages sustain cultural memory and social cohesion. Nigeria's task is to nurture both dimensions, ensuring that linguistic diversity becomes a source of unity rather than division. A harmonious linguistic future requires continuous dialogue among policymakers, educators, linguists, and community leaders. Through multilingual education, policy enforcement, and digital innovation, Nigeria can transform its linguistic diversity into a developmental advantage, one that reflects both the richness of its heritage and the dynamism of its modern identity.

Conclusion

The journey of English in Nigeria reflects its historical, sociocultural, and linguistic evolution. From its colonial introduction as a tool of governance and evangelisation to its postcolonial transformation as a medium of education, commerce, and identity, English has become an inseparable part of Nigeria's linguistic reality. However, this position remains paradoxical: while English unites Nigerians under a common communicative platform, it simultaneously embodies the legacy of cultural displacement and social inequality. Thus, the criticisms of English, rooted in cultural alienation, linguistic elitism, and educational contradictions, remain valid. However, to deny its practical relevance would ignore the realities of Nigeria's multilingual structure and global interdependence. English continues to serve as the lingua franca of administration, education, and diplomacy, providing Nigerians with access to scientific knowledge and participation in international discourse. Therefore, there is a need for a nuanced understanding of the coexistence of English with the Nigerian indigenous languages. English is not inherently oppressive. Its impact depends on how it is used and contextualised. Nigerians have indigenized the language, reshaping it into a culturally expressive tool that reflects the country's creativity and resilience. The challenge ahead is to ensure that the growth of English complements rather than threatens indigenous languages, so that Nigeria's linguistic future is built not on replacement but on balance, coexistence, and mutual empowerment.

Recommendations

Drawing from the discussions and findings of this study, several actionable recommendations are proposed to guide language policy, education, and cultural development in Nigeria.

i. The government should ensure the full implementation of the National Policy on Education by promoting mother-tongue instruction in early schooling.

Vol. 2, No. 5, 2025, ISSN: 1595-9287

ii. Academic and research institutions should collaborate to develop dictionaries, grammar resources, and archives that preserve and promote local languages, thereby enhancing their preservation and promotion.

iii. Language use in governance and public communication should reflect the country's multilingual character. Government information, legislative debates, and media programming should be available in major Nigerian languages to foster inclusion and national unity.

iv. Nigeria's creative industries have great potential for promoting linguistic balance. Supporting bilingual films, multilingual literature, and indigenous-language music will strengthen cultural identity while showcasing Nigerian expression on a global stage.

v. English should be viewed as a shared national resource rather than a symbol of colonial history. Promoting a positive and inclusive attitude toward English will allow Nigerians to use it confidently without devaluing their native linguistic heritage.

vi. There is also a need to establish a National Language Research Council to coordinate multilingual policy and research. Such a council would bring together linguists, educators, and policymakers to promote evidence-based decisions on language planning and development.

References

Achebe, C. (1965). English and the African Writer. Transition, 18, 27–30.

Adegbija, E. (2004). Language Attitudes in Nigeria: A Sociolinguistic Overview. Multilingual Matters.

Adegbite, W. (2003). Enlightenment and Attitudes of Nigerians Towards the English Language. International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 6(3–4), 123–132.

Adegbite, W. (2013). The English Language and Development in Nigeria. Nigerian Journal of Applied Linguistics, 9(1), 1–15.

Afolayan, A. (1985). The Sociolinguistic Impact of English in Nigeria. Studies In African Linguistics, 16(2), 93–108.

Ajayi, J. F. A. (1965). Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841–1891: The Making of A New Elite. Longman.

Arslan, M., Alagoz, B., & Yilmaz, F. S. (2024). Exploring the Influence of Language on Cultural Identity: A Comparative Linguistic and Literary Analysis. Journal of Cultural Linguistics, 12(1), 15–28.

Bamgbose, A. (1995). English in the Nigerian Environment. In A. Bamgbose, A. Banjo, & A. Thomas (Eds.), New Englishes: A West African Perspective (pp. 9–26). Mosuro.

Bamgbose, A. (2003). A Recurring Decimal: English In Language Policy And Planning. World Englishes, 22(4), 419–431.

Bamgbose, A. (2011). African Languages Today: The Challenge of and Prospects for Empowerment Under Globalisation. Nordic Journal of African Studies, 20(3), 123–140.

Bamiro, E. (2006). The Politics of Code-Switching: English, Yoruba, and Postcolonial Identity In Nigerian Literature. World Englishes, 25(3–4), 437–450.

Banjo, A. (1996). Making A Virtue Of Necessity: An Overview Of The English Language In Nigeria, University Press.

Canagarajah, A. S. (2013). Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations. Routledge.

Emenanjo, E. N. (1990). Multilingualism, Minority Languages and Language Policy in Nigeria, Central Books.

Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN). (2014). National Policy on Education (6th ed.), NERDC Press.

Fishman, J. A. (1991). Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations Of Assistance To Threatened Languages, Multilingual Matters.

Hamidi, M. A. (2023). The Relationship between Language, Culture, and Identity: A Sociolinguistic Perspective. International Journal of Language Studies, 17(3), 55–70.

Igboanusi, H. (2002). Democracy and the Survival Of The English Language In Nigeria. Peter Lang.

Igboanusi, H. (2008). Empowering Nigerian Languages in the Era of Globalisation. Language, Culture and Curriculum, 21(2), 175–188.

Igboanusi, H., & Ohia, I. (2020). Linguistic Inequality and Language Policy in Nigeria. Sociolinguistic Studies, 14(1), 87–106.

Moore, L. C. (2016). Language Socialisation. In K. Brown (Ed.), The Routledge Handbook of Linguistic Anthropology, Routledge.

Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o. (1986). Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature, Heinemann.

Ochs, E., & Schieffelin, B. B. (2017). The Theory of Language Socialisation. In P. A. Duff & S. May (Eds.), Language Socialisation: Encyclopedia of Language Education (3rd ed., pp. 3–15), Springer.
Ogu, J. (1992). A Historical Survey of English and the Nigerian Situation. Pumark Nigeria.
Ogunmodimu, M. (2015). Missionary Education and the English Language in Colonial Nigeria. Journal Of Historical Studies, 7(2), 44–58.
Owolabi, K. (2012). Language, Culture, and Identity in Africa. Concept Publications.
Oyetade, S. O. (1992). Language Policy and Planning in Nigeria. Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 13(1–2), 157–168.
Pennycook, A. (2017). The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language (2nd ed.), Routledge.
Pennycook, A. (2018). Posthumanist Applied Linguistics, Routledge.
Phillipson, R. (1992). Linguistic Imperialism, Oxford University Press.
Piller, I. (2017). Intercultural Communication: A Critical Introduction (2nd ed.). Edinburgh University Press.
Shaikh, H. (2024). Cultural Identity in Intercultural Communication: Analysing Code-Switching and Linguistic Choice among Bangladeshi Students in China. Language & Education Today, 15(2), 45–63.
Swann, J., & Deumert, A. (2018). Sociolinguistics and Language Creativity. In L. L. Cameron & R. J. Carter (Eds.), Creativity and Language: The State of the Art (pp. 179–201). Palgrave Macmillan.
Taiwo, R. (2020). Language and Communication in Technical Education In Nigeria. Nigerian Journal Of Applied Linguistics, 9(1), 23–40.
UNESCO. (2003). Education in a Multilingual World. UNESCO Position Paper, Paris: UNESCO.