



Strategic Planning for English Language Teaching in Multilingual Classrooms: A Case Study of Public Schools in Ondo State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Given Nigeria's linguistic diversity, planning for English Language Teaching (ELT) in schools must move beyond generic language policies and adopt approaches that are responsive to local multilingual realities. This study explores strategic approaches for planning ELT in multilingual classrooms within Ondo State, Nigeria. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis and translanguaging pedagogy, and using a qualitative case study method, the research investigates how public schools accommodate or suppress learners' linguistic diversity during English instruction. Data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and document reviews across three selected schools in urban, semi-urban, and rural parts of Ondo State. Findings reveal that while English is the official language of instruction, teachers frequently resort to Yoruba—either consciously or subconsciously to aid comprehension. However, the use of indigenous languages remains informal, unsupported, and in many cases discouraged by policy and examination standards. The study identifies key barriers to strategic planning, including teacher training gaps, curriculum rigidity, and lack of instructional resources in local languages. The study concludes with practical recommendations for educational planners, teacher trainers, and policymakers, emphasizing the need for context-responsive planning that views multilingualism not as a barrier, but as a pedagogical resource for enhancing ELT in Nigeria.

Keywords: Classroom planning; English Language Teaching (ELT); inclusive pedagogy; multilingual education; language policy; Translanguaging.



Introduction

Nigeria, home to over 500 languages, stands as one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world (UNESCO, 2023). In this vibrant landscape, English holds the position of official language and the primary medium of instruction in schools, particularly from the upper primary level onwards. However, this dominance has generated significant tensions in multilingual classrooms, where students often begin formal education with little to no exposure to English. The resulting linguistic mismatch between home and school environments contributes to poor comprehension, low participation, and underachievement in core subjects, especially in rural and underserved areas (Eze & Ajayi, 2023).

In Ondo State, located in Nigeria's southwestern region, Yoruba is the dominant indigenous language, spoken widely at home and in communities. Despite this linguistic uniformity, English remains the exclusive language of instruction across public schools, in accordance with national examination standards and broader policy expectations. Teachers in many Ondo classrooms recognize the disconnect and often switch between English and Yoruba to support understanding. However, these practices remain informal and unsupported by teacher training or curriculum design. The absence of strategic planning that incorporates multilingual realities leads to confusion, inconsistency, and reduced effectiveness in English Language Teaching (ELT).

The Nigerian National Policy on Education (2020) recommends the use of the mother tongue or language of the immediate environment at the early stages of education. However, as studies have shown, implementation remains weak and fragmented (Idris & Adebayo, 2024). In most cases, this policy is acknowledged on paper but ignored in practice, largely due to lack of materials, absence of enforcement structures, and the overriding influence of English-only assessments (Onyemelukwe & Adegbite, 2024).

While some progress has been made, particularly in curriculum reform and teacher education programs, a systemic approach to multilingual classroom planning is still lacking. Theoretical models such as Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis suggest that first-language (L1) development supports second-language (L2) acquisition which implies that the use of Yoruba in classrooms could strengthen students' English skills, not weaken them. In the same vein, the concept of translanguaging reframes code-switching not as linguistic interference but as a legitimate pedagogical tool (Garcia & Wei, 2014).



This study explores how ELT can be improved through multilingual classroom planning in Ondo State secondary schools. It investigates how teachers currently respond to linguistic diversity, what challenges they face, and how strategic planning and training can improve outcomes. By focusing on a single state, the research offers in-depth insights into a typical Nigerian educational context, allowing for recommendations that are locally relevant yet broadly applicable.

Statement of the Problem

Although Nigeria's education policy acknowledges the country's linguistic diversity, English remains the sole language of instruction in most public schools especially in States like Ondo despite the fact that many students speak Yoruba as their first language. This misalignment between home and school languages creates cognitive barriers and contributes to underachievement. While the National Policy on Education recommends mother-tongue instruction at the lower primary level, its application is often informal and unsupported, with teachers relying on personal initiative rather than structured guidance or training. High-stakes assessments like WAEC and NECO, conducted exclusively in English, reinforce this monolingual bias and discourage the use of indigenous languages. In the absence of strategic planning and resources for multilingual teaching, classroom practices vary widely, limiting equitable learning opportunities. This study therefore calls for more intentional, context aware approaches that integrate students' linguistic realities into ELT to improve educational outcomes.

Purpose of the Study

The study aimed at exploring strategic approaches for planning ELT in multilingual classrooms within Ondo State. Specifically, the objectives of the study were to:

- a. examine how multilingualism is currently addressed in the planning and delivery of English Language Teaching in public schools in Ondo State.
- b. explore teachers' perceptions and classroom practices regarding the use of indigenous languages alongside English.
- c. identify the major challenges educators and administrators face in implementing multilingual strategies in ELT.
- d. propose strategic approaches for enhancing ELT through context-sensitive multilingual classroom planning.

Research Questions



Based on the specific objectives of the study, the following research question were asked and answered:

1. How do public schools in Ondo State plan for and manage English Language Teaching in multilingual classroom settings?
2. What are teachers' attitudes and actual practices concerning the use of Yoruba or other indigenous languages during English instruction?
3. What challenges hinder the implementation of multilingual strategies in English Language Teaching?
4. What strategic approaches can be adopted to improve ELT outcomes in multilingual classrooms in Ondo State?

Significant of the Study

This study holds significance as it sheds light on the realities of English Language Teaching within linguistically diverse classrooms in Ondo State, offering a grounded understanding of how language policies play out in practice. By examining teachers' current responses to the multilingual nature of their classrooms, alongside the obstacles they encounter, the research uncovers the gaps between policy intentions and day-to-day teaching practices. Its localized focus enables the development of targeted, context-sensitive strategies that not only address the needs of Ondo State but can also inform broader educational reforms in similar multilingual settings across Nigeria. In doing so, the study contributes valuable evidence for more inclusive, effective language education planning.

Theoretical Framework

Effective English Language Teaching (ELT) in multilingual settings like Ondo State, Nigeria, requires understanding the interplay between language development, cognition, and identity. This study draws on four key frameworks—Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis, Translanguaging Theory, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, and Critical Language Policy Theory to examine language instruction from cognitive, pedagogical, and socio-political perspectives. Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis suggests that skills developed in a learner's first language (L1), such as Yoruba, can positively influence second language (L2) acquisition, particularly English. When teachers recognize and facilitate this transfer, students' overall academic performance improves, countering the misconception that L1 use hinders English learning.



Translanguaging Theory, developed by García and Wei, views bilinguals as drawing from a unified language system. In practice, students actually alternate between Yoruba and English to explain meaning and enable understanding. Although often not officially taken up, the practice increases participation and validates all types of linguistic resources in the classroom.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, and particularly his explication of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), encourages the use of social interaction and strategic L1 to enhance L2 learning. For Ondo State pupils, speaking in Yoruba helps them understand challenging English ideas better.

Critical Language Policy Theory recognises power relations involved in language instruction. In spite of official policy backing indigenous languages in nursery education, English still dominates because of social preference and structural disparities. This theory is prompting the reconsideration of policy implementation to provide more just and culturally responsive practices.

These theories all suggest the termination of strict, English-only teaching and towards a more inclusive multilingual model. While Cummins and Vygotsky offer focus on cognitive routes, García offers classroom strategies, and Critical Language Policy brings a challenge to systemic norms—all in an effort to promote productive and equitable language instruction.

Literature Review

The academic literature regarding ELT in Nigeria has recurring concerns: the tension between monolingual and multilingual practices, challenges of policy implementation, best classroom practice, and areas of training for teachers.

Multilingualism in Nigerian Schools

Multilingualism in Nigerian schools presents both a cultural asset and a policy dilemma. Although the country boasts over 500 languages, English remains the dominant medium of instruction. In states like Ondo, many students begin school fluent in Yoruba but with limited exposure to English, which often hampers early academic progress. Studies consistently show that using a child's first language in early education supports better comprehension, memory retention, and cognitive development (UNESCO, 2021; Okonkwo & Ibrahim, 2022). Nevertheless, societal attitudes and high-stakes assessments continue to favour English, reinforcing a monolingual educational culture (Chukwuma, 2023).

Challenges in Language Policy Implementation



While the National Policy on Education advocates for mother-tongue instruction at the foundational level, actual classroom implementation falls short. Schools often fail to operationalise this policy due to challenges such as limited funding, scarcity of instructional materials in local languages, and parental resistance driven by concerns about English proficiency and future opportunities (Akindele, 2021; Iroanya & Balogun, 2023). As a result, many institutions merely pay lip service to multilingual education without integrating it meaningfully into teaching practices.

English Language Teaching (ELT) Strategies in Multilingual Settings

In response to these challenges, several ELT strategies have emerged. Translanguaging stands out as a flexible, learner-centered approach that enables students to draw on both Yoruba and English to build understanding. Research indicates that this method improves academic outcomes and reduces learner anxiety (García & Lin, 2021; Oduola & Oyebola, 2024). Additional strategies such as code-switching, bilingual glossaries, and student-led translation also support more inclusive classrooms. However, these innovations are often limited by teachers' lack of training in multilingual instruction (Eze, 2022). Teacher

Preparation and Systemic Constraints

A major constraint in realizing multilingual ELT is the limited professional development provided to teachers. Most educators are trained to deliver instruction solely in English and receive little guidance on how to integrate local languages pedagogically. This results in inconsistent practices that vary from classroom to classroom. Furthermore, the dominance of English in national examinations discourages the use of indigenous languages, even when doing so could enhance learning (Ajibola & Nwachukwu, 2021; Bakare, 2024). Teacher education reforms must therefore prioritize multilingual pedagogies.

Identified Gaps and Emerging Opportunities

Despite strong theoretical and empirical backing for multilingual education, persistent gaps remain. These include weak policy enforcement, poor teacher preparation, limited access to mother-tongue resources, and entrenched societal biases. However, current research into translanguaging, cognitive development, and culturally responsive teaching offers actionable insights. Research by UNESCO (2023), along with Nigerian-originated initiatives (Okusanya & Taiwo, 2023), speculate that with political will and investment, multilingual ELT practice would enormously contribute to learning gains, especially in linguistically heterogeneous areas such as Ondo State.



Methodology

This research used qualitative case study design in investigating strategic ELT practices in multilingual classes of Ondo State, Nigeria. The use of the approach was motivated by a desire to describe participants' on-a-daily-basis experience, situation problems, and tacit strategies that arise in authentic school setting phenomena best investigated under qualitative investigation.

Research Design

A multiple case study design was used to enable intensive study within diverse school environments—urban, semi-urban, and rural. The design enabled the comparison of classroom language use, policy meaning-making, and planning strategies in diverse sociolinguistic environments. The interpretivist paradigm that underpins this study focuses on meaning-making, context sensitivity, and stakeholder perceptions (Creswell, 2018).

Study Area and School Selection

The research was carried out in Ondo State, Southwestern Nigeria. The largest spoken language in the state is Yoruba, while English remains the official medium of instruction. Three government schools were purposively selected to reflect various settings. Having both primary and secondary schools offers a ground to study multilingual ELT practices at various levels of education in various sociolinguistic settings.

- **School A:** An urban public secondary school in Akure South Local Government Area (LGA), where English is prioritized but Yoruba is still spoken informally.
- **School B:** A semi-urban public primary school in Owo LGA, representing both Yoruba speaking and migrant populations.
- Public Primary School, semi-urban, Owo LGA, Yoruba children and mothers migrant populations and speaking.
- School C: A prototype rural school in Odigbo LGA, where the majority of students begin school speaking Yoruba only.

The schools were selected based on closeness, linguistic diversity, and administrative consent.

Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select fifteen (15) participants. These are individuals who have direct contact with the interpretation of the language policy or English Language



Teaching (ELT). Nine classroom teachers (three from each school), three school administrators/head teachers, and three education officers from Ondo State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB) constituted the sample. The teachers were selected based on their experience in teaching English/literacy subjects while education officers got chosen for their roles in curriculum implementation and school supervision.

Research Instruments

The study adopted a multi-faceted qualitative approach, utilizing three main tools: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Interview guides were carefully crafted for teachers, head teachers, and SUBEB officials, targeting areas such as language use, instructional planning, and perspectives on multilingual strategies. The open-ended format gave participants space to elaborate, while still maintaining thematic focus. For classroom observations, a structured checklist was employed to monitor the use of English and Yoruba during lessons. Field notes supplemented these observations, capturing spontaneous language practices such as code-switching and translanguaging. Additionally, the researchers reviewed lesson plans, school memos, and state circulars using a straightforward document analysis template, assessing how language policies were reflected or sometimes absent in school-level planning. By triangulating these instruments, the study achieved a holistic perspective on both the intended and actual language practices within diverse educational settings.

Validation of Research Instruments

To ensure the validity of the research instruments, several strategies were implemented. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation of data sources, interviews, observations, and document reviews—across urban, semi-urban, and rural schools in Ondo State. Dependability was addressed by employing consistent tools, including piloted interview guides and structured observation checklists. The study supported confirmability by grounding interpretations in direct participant quotes and detailed field notes, while peer debriefing and member checks facilitated further verification of emerging themes. Transferability was enhanced by providing in-depth descriptions of the school contexts, enabling readers to gauge applicability to other multilingual environments.

Method of Data Collection

Data collection involved conducting individual semi-structured interviews with teachers, headteachers, and education officers. The interview protocol remained flexible,



enabling participants to discuss language practices, instructional planning, and multilingual strategies at length. Each interview lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes and, while English was the primary language, participants were free to switch to Yoruba when preferred. These diverse data sources collectively contributed to a comprehensive understanding of language use and policy in the sampled schools. Classroom observations involved attending at least one English lesson per teacher, focusing on how English and Yoruba were used, including moments of code-switching and translanguaging, as well as overall learner engagement. Finally, relevant documents such as lesson plans, internal memos, and official education circulars were reviewed to understand how language policy is interpreted and reflected in day-to-day school operations.

Method of Data Analysis

All interview transcripts and observation notes were coded thematically using NVivo software. Thematic analysis involved both deductive coding informed by the theoretical framework and inductive coding based on patterns emerging from the data. Key themes identified included; informal translanguaging practices, institutional constraints on local language use, teacher agency and improvisation, and conflicts between policy and assessment pressures. Findings from interviews, observations, and documents were triangulated to strengthen credibility.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents and interprets the main findings of the study, organized into five emergent themes: First, language use in the classroom. Second, teachers' attitudes toward multilingualism. Third, challenges to multilingual Planning. Forth, Informal Translanguaging Practices and Fifth, Policy–Practice Gaps. Each theme is discussed in relation to the study's theoretical framework and existing literature.

Language Use in the Classroom

Classroom observations revealed that English remains the official language of instruction in all three schools, consistent with the national curriculum and state-level policy expectations. However, Yoruba was frequently used by teachers as a support language, particularly when introducing new concepts, giving instructions, or correcting misunderstandings.

In School A (urban), teachers initially adhered to English, especially at the secondary level, but often slipped into Yoruba when students struggled. One English teacher stated:



"Sometimes I explain in Yoruba because if I don't, they won't get it, especially in larger classes." In School B (semi-urban), Yoruba use was more common and less self-conscious. Teachers code-switched frequently, especially in literacy and oral English lessons. In School C (rural), Yoruba was dominant. English was introduced gradually and often interpreted through Yoruba explanations. These findings reinforce Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis: students build understanding more easily when instruction connects with their L1. It also supports Vygotsky's theory that language mediates cognitive development when it is accessible to learners.

Teachers' Attitudes Toward Multilingualism

Interviews revealed that teachers generally viewed Yoruba as an important instructional resource, even though it is not officially endorsed. All teachers acknowledged that using students' L1 helped reduce confusion and increased learner engagement. However, there were contradictions in attitude. While many teachers supported the idea of multilingual teaching in theory, they also expressed fear that overreliance on Yoruba might harm students' performance in English-only exams. One teacher from School B explained: *"We are helping them now [with Yoruba], but what happens when they go to write WAEC?"* This tension shows how assessment pressures conflict with inclusive pedagogical beliefs. Teachers are caught between their intuitive understanding of what works in class and the institutional demands for English monolingualism.

Challenges to Multilingual Planning

Participants identified several structural and systemic barriers to multilingual ELT planning:

- **Lack of Training:** None of the teachers interviewed had received formal instruction in multilingual pedagogy. Their use of Yoruba was based on personal experience rather than professional guidance.
- **No Instructional Materials in Yoruba:** Schools lacked textbooks, visual aids, or glossaries that incorporate both English and Yoruba. This forced teachers to improvise.
- **Rigid Curriculum and Exams:** English is not only the medium of instruction but also the language of assessment. WAEC and NECO exams are strictly in English, leading teachers to prioritize English for exam preparation.



- **Policy Ambiguity:** While the National Policy on Education endorses the use of local languages at lower primary levels, no clear implementation frameworks exist at the state or LGA levels. Education officers admitted that schools were largely left to “figure it out” on their own.

These barriers are consistent with national-level findings (Idris & Adebayo, 2024) and illustrate the policy–practice gap described in Critical Language Policy theory.

Informal Translanguaging Practices

Despite the lack of formal training or support, translanguaging emerged organically as a key classroom strategy. Teachers used a variety of techniques to help students move between languages:

- Alternating sentences or explanations between English and Yoruba.
- Allowing peer discussions in Yoruba before answering questions in English.
- Translating key terms or difficult vocabulary during lessons.
- Using Yoruba to scaffold difficult content, especially in reading comprehension.

For example, in School C, a teacher paused an English reading activity to explain a culturally unfamiliar term in Yoruba. The result was immediate: students began asking questions and drawing connections to their own lives.

These practices align closely with García and Wei’s (2014) concept of translanguaging—not as random code-switching but as an intentional instructional strategy. It also reflects Vygotsky’s idea of scaffolding within the learner’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

Policy–Practice Gaps

One of the most consistent themes across all participants was the disconnect between national policy and classroom realities. Although the National Policy on Education (2020) allows for the use of local languages in early education, this is rarely implemented meaningfully. At the local level, neither school administrators nor education officers provided concrete plans for how to incorporate Yoruba into instruction. One SUBEB officer stated: *“The policy is there, but there’s no training, no materials, and no monitoring. Teachers just do what they can.”* This lack of system-wide planning reinforces the symbolic nature of language policy described by Ricento (2015) and Tollefson (2002). While the value



of indigenous languages is recognized in theory, the school system remains structured around English as the language of power, assessment, and mobility.

Synthesis

The findings confirm several key theoretical insights:

- **Cummins' Hypothesis** holds true: students learn English more effectively when their L1 supports cognitive development.
- **Translanguaging** occurs naturally, even without formal recognition, and improves learner engagement and comprehension.
- **Vygotsky's sociocultural theory** is reflected in how teachers scaffold learning using accessible language.
- **Critical Language Policy** explains the systemic inertia preventing reform—despite the practical benefits of multilingual strategies.

The study also highlights the agency of teachers, who find ways to meet learner needs despite institutional constraints. However, without formal training, materials, or policy backing, these efforts remain isolated and inconsistent.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight the urgent need for context-sensitive planning in English Language Teaching (ELT) within multilingual classrooms in Ondo State, Nigeria. While the use of indigenous languages like Yoruba has clear pedagogical value, it remains unsupported by training, resources, or policy enforcement. Addressing these gaps requires coordinated action from education planners, policymakers, teacher educators, and curriculum developers.

Implications for Policy

At the national and state levels, this study exposes a major policy–practice divide. Although Nigeria's National Policy on Education (2020) recommends using the mother tongue or language of the immediate environment in early education, there is no implementation framework to guide its integration into classroom planning. In Ondo State, schools operate under the assumption that English is the only viable medium for learning and assessment. To bridge this gap:



- State Ministries of Education and SUBEB should localize the national policy by developing practical guidelines for incorporating Yoruba into ELT in early and middle primary levels.
- Language policy should not only exist on paper but be backed by clear timelines, budget allocations, and monitoring mechanisms.
- Policies must address examination practices, working with national assessment bodies (e.g., NECO, WAEC) to reduce the high-stakes pressure that reinforces English-only instruction.

Implications for Curriculum and Materials

The absence of bilingual teaching materials is a significant barrier to effective multilingual planning. Curriculum developers must prioritize the creation and distribution of context-relevant resources:

- Dual-language textbooks, visual aids, and reading materials in both English and Yoruba should be introduced in early grade classrooms.
- Teachers should have access to bilingual word banks, glossaries, and culturally relevant stories, helping bridge vocabulary development in both languages.
- Curriculum content should encourage flexibility, allowing for structured code switching and peer collaboration in the learners' L1.

When materials reflect students' linguistic identities, classroom learning becomes more inclusive, meaningful, and effective.

Implications for Teacher Education and Training

One of the most critical areas of intervention is teacher preparation. The study shows that while teachers are open to using Yoruba to support ELT, they lack training and theoretical grounding. To improve teacher capacity:

- Colleges of education and universities should integrate multilingual pedagogy, translanguaging theory, and culturally responsive teaching into pre-service teacher training.
- Continuous professional development (CPD) programs should be offered at the state level to equip in-service teachers with strategies for teaching English through learners' first languages.



- Teachers should be trained to understand language acquisition theories, identify where translanguaging is beneficial, and use scaffolding methods intentionally. Professionalizing the use of Yoruba in the classroom ensures it is no longer seen as “unofficial,” but as a valuable component of effective teaching.

Implications for School Leadership and Community Engagement

School heads and administrators play a key role in reinforcing or limiting multilingual practices. Without leadership support, even the most willing teachers may feel constrained. To address this:

- School leaders must be trained to understand the benefits of multilingual education and to create an enabling environment for flexible instruction.
- Parents and community leaders should be engaged in dialogue to shift perceptions about the value of Yoruba in education. Many parents associate English with success and fear that indigenous languages hinder learning. Awareness campaigns and parent forums are not just window dressing; they play a crucial role in demystifying the proven benefits of multilingual education. When schools and families share responsibility, support for bilingual approaches naturally grows, paving the way for more productive partnerships between home and school.

Conclusion

This study examined how English Language Teaching (ELT) is planned and practiced in multilingual classrooms in Ondo State and uncovered a pretty stark disconnect between policy and what actually happens in the classroom. Officially, English is still the medium of instruction, but, in practice, teachers frequently use Yoruba informally, especially in the early grades to help students understand. While this approach genuinely benefits learners, there is a lack of formal support, training, and resources for teachers, leaving them to improvise. Though, Translanguaging using multiple languages to aid comprehension has real value here, but its use remains patchy due to strict curricula and the heavy emphasis on English-only testing. Despite these barriers, teachers are willing to adapt, and students become more engaged when their linguistic backgrounds are recognized. Drawing on well-established language acquisition theories, the findings highlight an urgent need for policymakers, educators, and curriculum developers to work together. The goal is not to replace English, but to enrich learning and promote real inclusion in linguistically diverse classrooms.



Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Develop tailored, state-level strategies for implementing multilingual English instruction, ensuring a thoughtful and incremental inclusion of Yoruba within early English curricula.
2. Prioritize comprehensive teacher training in both translanguaging and multilingual pedagogical approaches, targeting educators at all career stages—whether entering the field or already in service.
3. Produce and distribute high-quality bilingual educational resources, such as dual-language textbooks and vocabulary aids, to support effective classroom learning.
4. Actively involve parents and community members in language policy discussions, fostering broader support and engagement with bilingual education initiatives.
5. Partner with national examination authorities to reconsider the dominance of English-only assessments and to pilot more inclusive

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