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# LANGUAGE AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: INSIGHTS FROM POLICY AND PRACTICE

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examines the critical role of language as a driver of national development in Nigeria, focusing on its impact across education, economic growth and governance. Despite a wealth of research on language and development, limited attention has been given to understanding the multifaceted role of language in Nigeria's national development, particularly in these key areas. The study adopted a qualitative research design, using document analysis, while incorporating relevant statistical data from secondary sources to support and contextualize the qualitative insights. Data were sourced from government publications (including the National Policy on Education and National Development Plans), international reports (World Bank, UNDP, UNICEF), and peer-reviewed studies. Grounded in Sapir-Whorf's Linguistic Relativity theory and Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz's Human Capital theory, the study identifies language as a key factor in national development. Language enhances literacy and human capital development in education, facilitates economic mobility and trade efficiency for economic development, and strengthens national cohesion and institutional efficiency in governance. Literacy, a key indicator of progress, has improved in Nigeria, reaching 69% in 2022. However, significant regional disparities persist. Language proficiency is linked to higher earnings and significantly influences trade and business. Additionally, constitutional and development frameworks rely on language to document and operationalise national visions. The study underscores the need for strategic language planning and inclusive policies to optimise the role of language in national development and ensure equitable participation in Nigeria's socio-economic transformation.*

**Keywords:** *Language, National development, Nigeria, Education, Governance*

## INTRODUCTION

Language is a fundamental and systematic tool for human communication, cultural expression, and social interaction. It serves as a medium through which ideas, values, knowledge, and emotions are transmitted across generations. As an essential and irreplaceable aspect of daily life, language enables individuals to carry out a wide range of activities, from simple exchanges to complex intellectual endeavours. Beyond its functional role, language also defines individual and collective identity, signifying belonging to a specific community or cultural group. Linguistically, language is a structured system of communication that employs agreed-upon signs, sounds, gestures, or symbols to convey meaningful messages (Zadeh, 1975; Tseng, 2018). These elements are combined according to specific rules, allowing for the creation of an infinite variety of expressions. Noam Chomsky (1957), a renowned linguist, describes language as a system formed by a limited set of rules and components capable of producing an unlimited variety of expressions, highlighting its generative and creative nature.

On the other hand, national development is a comprehensive and ongoing process aimed at enhancing the overall well-being of a nation and its people. It involves a multifaceted approach to improve economic stability, social equity, political stability, and cultural richness. This process is characterized by significant transformations in societal structures, public attitudes, and national institutions, alongside accelerated economic growth, reduced inequality, and poverty eradication (Todaro & Smith, 2012). The United Nations' decade report conceptualizes national development as "growth plus change," where change encompasses social, cultural, and economic dimensions, and is both qualitative and quantitative in nature (UN Academy, n. d). Similarly, it is about fostering a qualitative life for citizens, ensuring the long-term sustenance and growth of the nation (Lawal & Oluwatoyin, 2017).

Language is a cornerstone of national development, serving as a vital tool for societal progress and cultural transmission (Emeka-Nwobia, 2015). It facilitates knowledge transfer, promotes literacy, and enables citizens to participate effectively in political and economic processes. Education, a cornerstone of national development, is deeply intertwined with language, which functions as the primary medium for instruction and knowledge dissemination (Owu-Ewie &

Eshun, 2015). Language serves as the primary medium through which culture is conveyed and preserved, acting as a marker of identity and a repository of a community's heritage, achievements, and innovations (Olaoye, 2013). Politically, language enhances governance by ensuring that policies and government programmes are effectively communicated and understood by citizens. Language drives economic development by enabling effective communication, facilitating trade, and fostering innovation. Additionally, it empowers individuals to participate in the workforce and entrepreneurial activities. Recognising these dynamics, this paper aims to explore the multifaceted relationship between language and national development in Nigeria, focusing on its impact on education, economic development and governance.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Extant works have investigated the interplay between language and national development. Ayo Bamgbose (2000), in his seminal work *Language and Exclusion: The Consequences of Language Policies in Africa*, provides a critical analysis of how language policies in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, contribute to social and political exclusion. Bamgbose argues that language exclusion is a product of "elite closure," where those in power maintain their privileges through linguistic choices that marginalize non-speakers of the official language. He highlights the pervasive effects of language exclusion, linking it to illiteracy and the lack of access to political and economic opportunities for large segments of the population. Bamgbose emphasizes that language policies in Africa often lack implementation, leading to a "policy without practice" scenario. He calls for state-led measures to address language exclusion, including the development of multilingual policies, the promotion of African languages in education, and the adoption of second-language norms to ensure broader participation in governance and development. Bamgbose's work underscores the need for language policies that are inclusive and democratic, ensuring that linguistic diversity is harnessed as a resource rather than a barrier to national development.

Emeka-Nwobia (2015) highlights the critical role of indigenous languages in Nigeria's development. She notes that Nigeria, with over 400 to 500 indigenous languages, remains heavily reliant on English for education, governance, commerce, and the judiciary, even 54 years after independence. This reliance, she argues, has hindered the equal participation of citizens in governance, limited access to information, and restricted full involvement in government policies and programs. Emeka-Nwobia acknowledges the global advantages of English, such as access to international trade, science, and technology, but emphasizes the need to empower indigenous languages to meet the technological demands of the 21st century. She calls for deliberate efforts by the government, stakeholders, and individuals to prevent the exclusion of large segments of the population, language endangerment, and the possible extinction of indigenous languages. Emeka-Nwobia advocates for vigorous and regular language preservation and maintenance programs, asserting that a lost language equates to a lost identity, race, and generation. Her work underscores the importance of indigenous languages as conduits for cultural transmission and calls for their integration into national development frameworks.

Anyadiegwu (2012), in her study, "Nigeria's Language Policy: Implications for Sustainable Development", examines the implications of Nigeria's language policies for sustainable development, particularly in education. She highlights the challenges posed by the dominance of English as the official language and medium of instruction, arguing that it excludes the majority of Nigerians who are not proficient in English from participating in national issues. Anyadiegwu critiques the elitist nature of English, which she argues contributes to academic underachievement due to linguistic deficiencies. She cites Fudor's assertion that thinking is mediated by language, implying that Nigerians think in their indigenous languages, not English. This, she argues, creates a disconnect in the educational system, where students struggle to grasp concepts taught in a foreign language. Anyadiegwu also acknowledges the arguments in favour of English, such as its neutrality in a multi-ethnic society and its role in fostering mutual understanding and peace. However, she concludes that a monolingual policy favouring English is counterproductive and calls for a multicultural language policy that integrates indigenous

languages into the educational system and national discourse. She emphasizes the need for language planning and engineering to ensure that Nigeria's linguistic diversity is leveraged for sustainable development.

Language and identity are intrinsically linked to cultural preservation and national development. A recent study by Thompson et al. (2024) explores how the historical disruption of Africa's indigenous languages and identities through colonialism and neo-colonialism has contributed to the continent's underdevelopment. The study adopts a qualitative, historical approach and argues that the forced imposition of foreign languages and the erosion of native identities have marginalized African societies, limiting their socio-economic and political growth. Despite various interventions from global, regional, and national stakeholders, efforts to address language and identity crises in Africa remain ineffective due to external influences, weak frameworks, and a lack of political will. The study emphasizes the need for Africa to reclaim its linguistic and cultural heritage through conscientious education and the recalibration of identity, cultural values, and indigenous knowledge systems. This perspective aligns with existing discussions on the role of (indigenous) language in national development.

Language also plays a significant role in shaping ethnic sentiments and solidarity, which in turn, influences engagement with national development projects. Ayantayo (2021) demonstrates that language can either strengthen or weaken ethnic bonds, impacting how different groups perceive and participate in development initiatives. He suggests that communication strategies respecting linguistic diversity can mitigate ethnic tensions and foster inclusive development. This view is supported by Unya et al. (2022), who argue that multilingual approaches in policy dissemination and education can enhance grassroots participation and ensure that development benefits reach all segments of society. Pankau (2021) adds that managing linguistic diversity in educational settings enriches individual learning experiences and strengthens community development efforts. However, while Pankau's insights are valuable, their applicability to Nigeria's unique context requires further exploration, as highlighted by Bachama et al. (2021).

Olaoye (2013) provides a comprehensive perspective on the role of language in Nigeria's Vision 20-2020, emphasizing its centrality to national development. He argues that language and literature serve as catalysts for achieving the goals outlined in Nigeria's 7-point agenda, which is rooted in the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals. Olaoye posits that language education is a roadmap to national development, particularly in areas such as youth empowerment, socio-political and economic order, technological advancement, and democratic governance. He highlights the importance of multilingual and mother-tongue education, noting that indigenous languages are indispensable for cultural preservation, self-identity, and effective communication. Olaoye further stresses that language is the key to unlocking national development, as it enables individuals to interact with government policies and programs in ways they best understand. He recommends increased investment in multilingual education, teacher training, and the development of orthographies for indigenous languages to ensure the success of Nigeria's development goals.

Despite the potential benefits of multilingualism, challenges in language policy implementation persist. Owojecho (2020) identifies the lack of support for indigenous languages as a significant barrier to national integration, arguing that poor policy implementation undermines efforts to foster unity and development. His analysis highlights the dominance of English in Nigeria's sociolinguistic landscape, where it occupies critical functional roles in governance, education, legislation, and media. This dominance is perpetuated by the absence of decisive policy guidelines for the development and allocation of indigenous languages. Owojecho notes that successive governments have failed to codify many minority languages or define their roles in governance, education, and public administration. This neglect has marginalized indigenous languages and limited their utility in fostering grassroots participation and cultural preservation, thereby weakening their contribution to national integration.

Amuseghan (2010.) discusses the critical role of language policy provisions and curriculum issues in Nigeria's educational sector, particularly in secondary schools. He argues that Nigeria's

language policy implementation crisis significantly affects the quality of education, leading to systemic failures in national development. The National Policy on Education (1981) and the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1979) outline provisions for language use in education, yet their implementation remains weak. Secondary schools, which are crucial for intellectual and national development, face significant challenges due to the inconsistent application of language policies. Amuseghan stresses that the language of instruction crisis negatively impacts students' comprehension and academic performance. He calls for urgent reforms in Nigeria's language policy to ensure effective educational planning, recommending a comprehensive curriculum overhaul, improved teacher training, and enhanced policy enforcement strategies.

Given Nigeria's multilingual landscape, some scholars advocate for the adoption of Nigerian Pidgin as a national lingua franca. Afolabi et al. (2023) contend that Nigerian Pidgin possesses the linguistic characteristics necessary to unify the nation, as it is widely spoken across ethnic groups and social classes. They argue that elevating Pidgin to an official status could enhance national cohesion, particularly in a society where ethnic tensions often manifest in linguistic differences. Eltahir et al. (2021) further suggest that incorporating Pidgin into formal education and governance structures could improve accessibility and participation for marginalized groups. However, such a move would require significant policy reforms to ensure that Pidgin is standardized and effectively integrated into existing institutional frameworks. While these studies provide valuable insights into the relationship between language and national development, limited attention has been given to understanding the multifaceted role of language in Nigeria's national development, particularly in the areas of education, economic growth, and governance.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical framework combines Linguistic Relativity and Human Capital Theory to explore how language drives national development, especially in education, economic growth, and governance. Linguistic Relativity highlights how language shapes thought, perception, and cultural frameworks, influencing communication and policy implementation. Human Capital Theory emphasises language as an investment, enhancing productivity, economic mobility, and governance efficiency.

### **Linguistic relativity**

Linguistic relativity, often referred to as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, explores the relationship between language, thought, and perception. It is also known by other names, such as the Whorf Hypothesis, Whorf-Sapir Hypothesis, or Whorfianism, reflecting its association with the linguists, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. Linguistic relativity posits that the structure and vocabulary of a language shape the way its speakers perceive and interpret the world (Ottenheimer, 2009).

The hypothesis exists in two main forms: a strong version, known as linguistic determinism, and a weaker version, which is more widely accepted today. The strong version posits that language strictly determines thought, meaning that the structure and vocabulary of a language limit and define the cognitive categories available to its speakers. While this interpretation was influential in early linguistic studies, it has largely been discredited by contemporary linguists due to a lack of empirical support (Wolff & Holmes, 2010). The weaker version, on the other hand, suggests that language influences thought and perception without rigidly constraining them. Research supports the idea that linguistic structures shape how speakers perceive and interpret the world, but they do not entirely dictate cognitive processes (Ahearn, 2012).

Despite its influence, Linguistic Relativity Theory (Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis) has faced criticism regarding the extent and nature of its effects on cognition. Wolff and Holmes (2011) argue that while language influences thought in specific domains such as color perception, spatial relations, and numerical understanding, it does not determine fundamental cognitive structures or erase preexisting conceptual distinctions. Bohnemeyer (2020) further critiques the theory by highlighting

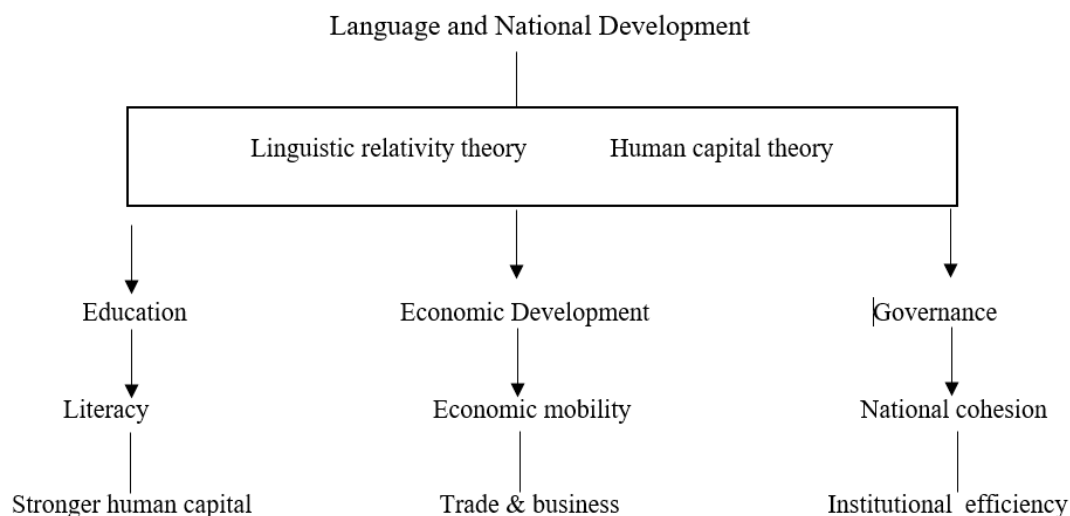
the inconsistency of empirical findings and the challenge of distinguishing language-driven cognitive differences from broader cultural influences. Additionally, while some studies suggest that language can induce a schematic mode of thinking, critics contend that cognitive processes remain largely universal, with language playing a facilitative rather than deterministic role.

### Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory, developed by Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz in the 1960s, posits that the knowledge, skills, experience, and abilities of individuals collectively contribute to economic growth and national development. This theory emphasizes that investments in education, training, and workforce development enhance productivity, innovation, and economic performance, making human capital a key driver of progress in both public and private sectors (Huff, 2024). A fundamental principle of Human Capital Theory is that education and skill acquisition are investments that yield long-term benefits. Becker and Schultz highlighted that as economies accumulate physical capital, the relative importance of intellectual and human capital increases. This means that a well-educated and trained workforce contributes more effectively to national economic prosperity, social stability, and institutional efficiency (C, 2024).

Human Capital Theory has faced significant criticism from economists, sociologists, and behavioural theorists. Early critiques, such as those by Richard Freeman (1976), argued that human capital does not directly enhance productivity but merely serves as a signal of talent and ability, with actual productivity emerging from on-the-job training and motivation. Similarly, Bowles and Gintis (1975) critiqued the theory from a Marxian perspective, stating that reducing labor to capital ignores class struggles and worker rights, ultimately reinforcing economic inequalities. More modern critiques contend that Human Capital Theory oversimplifies the relationship between education, productivity, and income, failing to account for structural inequalities that affect wages and employment opportunities. Additionally, Blaug (1976a) criticized the theory for its lack of critical tests and empirical validation, arguing that it often relied on ad hoc explanations rather than robust predictions.

While Human Capital Theory has faced criticism, several scholars have provided responses and refinements that reinforce its relevance. Fagerlind and Saha (as cited in Almendarez, 2013) argue that the theory justifies public expenditure on education and aligns with democratic ideologies, emphasising the role of education in promoting equal opportunities and national development. Additionally, Fernando and Fernando (2014) highlight that Human Capital Theory has been successfully applied to various economic decisions, including occupational choice and migration, demonstrating its broader implications beyond wage determination.



**Figure 1: Analytical Model for Language and National Development**

The above Fig 1 schema serves as the theoretical/analytical model for the study, illustrating the interconnected pathways through which language drives national development across three key dimensions: education, economic development, and governance. In the context of education, language fosters literacy, cognitive skill development, and stronger human capital, which are foundational for individual and societal progress. For economic development, language proficiency directly impacts employability, facilitates economic mobility, and drives trade and business expansion, fostering a dynamic and competitive economy. In governance, effective language use enhances policy communication, reinforces national cohesion by bridging social and cultural divides, and improves institutional efficiency, ensuring transparent governance and accessible public services.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a qualitative research design, using document analysis to explore the relationship between language and national development in Nigeria, focusing on education, economic development, and governance. The study adopted a qualitative research design, using document analysis, while incorporating relevant statistical data from secondary sources to support and contextualize the qualitative insights. It integrates relevant statistical data from secondary sources to both support and contextualize the qualitative findings. Like other qualitative approaches, document analysis involves critically examining texts to derive meaning, deepen understanding, and generate empirical insights (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Document analysis was used in this study to systematically examine and interpret relevant government publications to uncover patterns, meanings, and insights about the role of language in Nigeria's national development. The qualitative approach was chosen for its ability to provide an in-depth, nuanced understanding of the role of this relationship. Key documents analysed include the National Policy on Education (NPE), provisions in the Nigerian Constitution related to language, government language planning documents, and economic reports. Additionally, the study examined economic reports on language, human capital, and workforce productivity, as well as publications from international organizations (e.g., UNESCO, UNDP), addressing the role of language in education, economic participation, and governance in multilingual societies.

A purposive sampling approach was used to select official documents, policy papers, and research articles that are directly relevant to language and national development. The selection criteria included relevance to the thematic focus of the study – education, economic development, and governance. credibility (ensuring that documents come from government agencies, international organizations, and peer-reviewed sources), and a focus on recent studies and policies to reflect current trends and developments. For data analysis, a thematic approach was applied, systematically reviewing and coding documents into key themes that align with the study's objectives. The analysis examined how language drives national development by identifying its role in education (enhancing literacy and strengthening human capital), economic development (improving market adaptability and boosting productivity), and governance (fostering citizen engagement and promoting inclusive governance).

## **FINDINGS**

This section examines how language shapes Nigeria's development across three interconnected pillars: education, economic growth, and governance. The data analysis traces language's role in fostering literacy and cognitive skills (education), enhancing employability and market participation (economic development), and strengthening policy communication and institutional efficiency (governance).

### **Education**

As Nigeria's former Minister of Education, Mallam Adamu Adamu, aptly noted in 2018, a nation's development hinges on the quality of its education, and any country that fails to educate its people is destined to fail (cited in Nielsen, 2021: para 1). Language constitutes the fundamental architecture of education, operating as both the vehicle for knowledge transmission and the cognitive framework that shapes learning processes. Its role extends beyond communication to actively structuring thought patterns, literacy acquisition, and the development of analytical capabilities essential for educational success, which is a key driver of national development. Meanwhile, this section specifically examines how language shapes literacy, cognitive development, and human capital formation, highlighting their role as fundamental pillars of educational and, in turn, national advancement.

Literacy is the ability to read, write, and interpret information across various formats, enabling individuals to function in society, achieve personal and professional goals, and expand their knowledge and potential (National Assessment of Adult Literacy, n.d.). It extends beyond traditional reading and writing to include digital literacy, ensuring effective engagement with both print and electronic media (Valtin et al., 2016). Literacy, as the measurable manifestation of language mastery, serves as the critical bridge between basic education and advanced cognitive growth.

One of the basic indices of development in every society is the level of literacy in that society (Jiboku, 2002). In Nigeria, literacy transcends basic reading and writing—it is a fundamental determinant of socioeconomic mobility, civic participation, and national development.

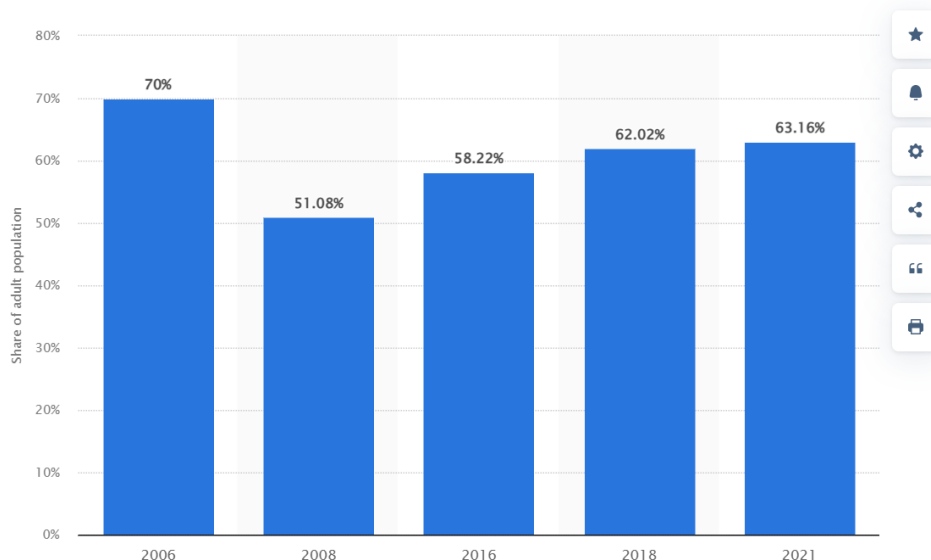


Figure 2: Literacy rates in Nigeria from 2006 to 2021 (Statista, 2024: para 1)

Figure 2 shows the literacy rates in Nigeria from 2006 to 2021. In 2021, Nigeria's adult literacy rate, representing the proportion of individuals aged 15 and older who can read, write, and comprehend simple expressions relevant to daily life, saw a rise of 1.1 percentage points (a 1.77% increase) compared to 2018. Despite the deceleration in growth, the rate reached a record high of 63.16% during the observed period. According to NBS (2022), this upward trend continued, climbing to 69%, approaching the levels recorded in 2006.

However, these national statistics mask stark regional disparities. While literacy rates officially stand at 69% (NBS, 2022), the North-South divide remains a glaring challenge. Southern states like Imo (96.4%) significantly outperform northern states such as Yobe (7.2%) by a staggering margin of 89 percentage points (NBS, 2017). This gap reflects systemic barriers, including cultural norms that discourage education, particularly for girls, and economic constraints that prioritise



child labour over schooling (UNICEF, 2025). Conflict and insecurity, especially in the north, disrupt education, while shortages of trained teachers and learning materials undermine quality (NBS, 2022). Additionally, rural areas face infrastructural neglect compared to urban regions, further widening the literacy divide. Moreover, Nigeria faces an alarming number of out-of-school children. An estimated 10.2 million primary school-aged children and 8.1 million junior secondary school-aged children are not attending school. Even among those enrolled, learning outcomes remain concerning—73% of children aged 7–14 struggle to understand simple sentences, and 75% cannot solve basic math problems (UNICEF, 2025).

Beyond literacy, language proficiency is central to human capital development, forming the backbone of educational success, workforce readiness, and socioeconomic advancement. Research shows that fluency in a country's dominant language enhances productivity, increases earnings, and serves as a key indicator of an individual's potential to employers (Chiswick & Miller, 1995). Studies conducted in the United States, Germany, Canada, Australia, Israel, and the United Kingdom highlight the significant role of language proficiency in accessing high-skilled employment and advancing economic opportunities (Chiswick, 1978; Kossoudji, 1988; Dustmann, 1994).

The impact of English proficiency on economic opportunities and earnings of indigenous language speakers in developing countries has been well-documented. For instance, in Bangladesh, proficiency in English has been highlighted as essential for graduates entering a globalized job market (Erling, 2017). The English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP) and the English in Action (EIA) project in Bangladesh introduced communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches to enhance English proficiency, aiming to boost education outcomes and foster economic development (Hamid, 2010; Rahman & Pandian, 2018; Ali et al, 2023). Similarly, in South Africa, English proficiency plays a significant role in labor market outcomes. Posel and Casale (2010) found that among African men, those proficient in English—defined as the ability to read and write the language very well—earned over 50% more than their non-proficient counterparts.

In Nigeria, English is not only the primary language of instruction in schools but also a critical tool for national development. While early education begins in the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community, English becomes the dominant medium at later stages (NPE, p. 13). Beyond serving as the language of instruction, English is a core subject at all educational levels and a mandatory requirement for university admission. Importantly, a credit pass in English in external examinations by the West African Examination Council and National Examination Council is essential for entry into Nigerian higher institutions, reinforcing its role as a gateway to academic and professional success. It is the language of educational evaluation (Awonusi, 2004). Proficiency in English is strongly associated with effective study habits and academic success, further linking strong language skills to long-term economic mobility and individual growth (Kader et al., 2020).

Language education plays a crucial role in reducing poverty and income inequality while empowering individuals and communities (World Bank, 2019). By providing individuals with the language skills needed to succeed in education and careers, it improves their access to economic opportunities and fosters upward mobility, especially in developing countries where knowing a global language like English is crucial for success. Proficiency in a dominant language like English enhances job opportunities and global market competitiveness (OECD, 2019), enabling effective communication among businesses, investors, and clients, which, in turn, drives economic growth (World Bank, 2019).

Moreover, English proficiency significantly influences employment prospects, as strong communication skills – particularly in speaking and writing – are highly valued by employers in both local and international markets (Ghani et al., 2012; Mavisakalyan & Weber, 2018). Additionally, higher proficiency in the official language enhances social capital, which significantly improves employability (Eltahir et al., 2021). This is particularly evident in job advertisements, where communication skills are consistently listed as essential qualifications. A survey of job

postings on LinkedIn confirms this trend, as positions in both private and public sectors, as well as multinational corporations, frequently emphasize the need for “excellent communication skills” or “strong communication skills.” Examples include roles such as Business Development Manager/Executive, Technical Advisor – Financing for Assistive Technology, and Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) Programme Coordinator, all of which explicitly highlight communication proficiency as a key requirement.

### **Economic Development**

The intersection of language and economic growth reveals a complex relationship, influencing individual earning potential, trade dynamics, and national development. As an emerging field, the economics of language is an emerging field that examines how linguistic factors influence key economic indicators (Grin, 2003). Language proficiency serves as a valuable economic asset, enhancing job prospects, facilitating international trade, and strengthening global competitiveness. Notably, the growth of English itself has been driven by economic forces, acting as a “network good” whose value increases with the size of its user base, trade integration, and institutional adoption (Reksulak et al., 2004). This phenomenon creates a self-reinforcing cycle: as English gains greater economic value, more individuals and nations invest in acquiring proficiency, further solidifying its global influence. Empirical studies support this relationship, demonstrating that English proficiency correlates positively with economic growth, particularly in Asia and Europe, where it functions as a critical component of human capital (Lee, 2012).

Building upon this foundation, the role of English as a medium for knowledge dissemination further reinforces its economic significance. A substantial portion of new knowledge originates from developed countries where English holds a prominent status, and developing nations experience efficiency gains by adopting and integrating this knowledge into their economies (Caselli & Coleman, 2000, 2001; Hall & Jones, 1999). The prevalence of English in academic publishing exemplifies its role in global knowledge exchange. Many internationally recognized journals, including those affiliated with non-English-speaking countries, have transitioned to publishing exclusively in English to increase accessibility and impact. For instance, Oxford Economic Papers, published by Oxford University Press, and The Quarterly Journal of Economics, one of the oldest professional journals in the field, are both published in English, making cutting-edge research widely available to scholars and policymakers worldwide.

Beyond knowledge transfer, language proficiency is a key determinant of economic mobility, influencing job opportunities, earnings, and career advancement. As an exchange-facilitating institution, language plays a role similar to well-established market structures, such as property rights and contract enforcement, in supporting economic transactions (Reksulak, Shughart & Tollison, 2004). Earnings are often linked to language proficiency, as dominant language fluency enhances job prospects and wage potential. This correlation stems from the economic benefits associated with language skills, including increased exposure and efficiency in second-language acquisition, and greater integration into labour markets (Chiswick & Miller, 1983). Investments in language education, particularly in early schooling, foster skill development and higher educational attainment, ultimately boosting productivity and economic prospects (Yuki, 2021). An illustrative example is Nigeria’s National Policy on Education, which mandates instruction in the native language during early primary education to enhance comprehension, strengthen foundational skills, and improve long-term academic and economic outcomes.

Moreover, in an era of globalisation, language diversity has direct economic implications, particularly in transnational labour mobility. Proficiency in a widely spoken language, such as English, often determines access to global job markets, influencing both employability and earning potential (Wickström & Gazzola, 2016). Cross-sectional studies support this, showing that immigrants with strong language skills experience faster earnings growth (Siniver et al., 2010). This economic incentive drives many individuals—particularly those from rural or economically disadvantaged backgrounds—to view language proficiency as a critical stepping stone to migration. Fluency in dominant languages like English is often perceived as a gateway to better employment opportunities and financial security (Erling et al., 2019). Nigeria exemplifies this

trend, where English proficiency correlates with access to international labour markets and higher-paying roles abroad, reinforcing the link between language skills and economic mobility. Furthermore, language significantly influences trade and business, serving as a key driver of communication efficiency and economic outcomes. Studies reveal that shared languages can boost bilateral trade by an average of 44%, lowering communication barriers and streamlining international transactions (Egger & Lassmann, 2011; Ferro & Ribeiro, 2016). This effect is not limited to official languages but includes spoken ones, highlighting the critical role of linguistic alignment in fostering trade partnerships. Studies on global lingua francas further confirm that language similarity facilitates trade, though geographic proximity remains a stronger determinant (Ly et al., 2013). Conversely, language disparities can obstruct business dealings, while mutual intelligibility lowers transaction costs and improves negotiation outcomes (Ferro & Ribeiro, 2016). Multinational firms that prioritize language adaptation in foreign markets often achieve greater success, underscoring the strategic importance of linguistic competence (Džogović et al., 2022). The connection between trade and language is not unidirectional; economic activity and trade also influence language development. Historical patterns suggest that economic activity, particularly international trade, influences the expansion and transformation of vocabulary. Over the 19th and 20th centuries, economic growth and technological progress contributed to the introduction of new commercial terminology, reflecting the ever-evolving nature of global business (Reksulak et al., 2004). As traders engage with foreign markets, they acquire and refine linguistic skills to navigate diverse business environments. This aligns with classical economic theory by Adam Smith, which posits that language and trade are interdependent – human commerce thrives because language enables complex exchange (Levy, 1997). Language also influences marketing and consumer behaviour. The phrasing and style of word-of-mouth recommendations significantly impact purchasing decisions, illustrating how linguistic nuances shape economic outcomes (Packard & Berger, 2017). In practical settings, shared languages streamline business operations. For example, in Nigeria, English serves as the primary language of commerce, governing advertisements, contracts, corporate meetings, and negotiations (Adedun, 2014). As the language of boardroom discussions and shareholder assemblies, English enables businesses to operate seamlessly in both domestic and international markets.

## **Governance**

Governance, in the context of a state, refers to the processes, systems, and practices through which a government exercises authority and manages public resources to implement policies, ensure stability, and meet the needs of its citizens. It encompasses decision-making, accountability, transparency, and the effective delivery of public services to promote development and maintain order. Governance also involves the system of values, policies, and institutions through which a society manages its economic, political, and social affairs, including interactions among the state, civil society, and private sector (UNDP, 2002). It includes the activities of political and administrative authorities to oversee a country's management, including its economic, policy, and legal frameworks (UN, 2001; IMF, 2001). Language is integral to governance, as it serves as the medium for communication, policy implementation, and decision-making.

Language is an essential instrument for documenting national development, preserving historical achievements, cultural values, and policy frameworks for future generations. It enables nations to articulate visions, document achievements, and ensure continuity in governance. For instance, Nigeria's developmental trajectory is vividly reflected in its 1999 Constitution, a foundational legal document that establishes the framework for governance, specifies the roles of various institutions, and enshrines the rights of its citizens/ This developmental vision has been further articulated through successive national development plans, such as the First National Development Plan (1962–1968), the Second National Development Plan (1970–1974), the Third National Development Plan (1975–1980), the Fourth National Development Plan (1981–1985), the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) (2004–2007), the

Vision 20:2020, the Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP) (2017–2020), and most recently, the National Development Plan (2021-2025).

The current NDP, 2021-2025, operationalises Nigeria's long-term development vision by establishing concrete pathways toward the nation's socio-economic transformation, as articulated in the country's long-term vision, the Nigeria Agenda 2050. The transformative power of language in shaping development further finds concrete expression in Lagos State's governance history. Successive administrations have reportedly relied on these frameworks to sustain and expand Lagos's economic growth, showcasing how language captures and transmits governance strategies and visions of progress for continuity.

In multilingual societies, the role of language in governance extends to influencing national cohesion and institutional efficiency. A common language can serve as a unifying force, fostering a shared national identity and facilitating dialogue between diverse ethnic and linguistic groups. While a lingua franca facilitates intergroup dialogue, the most sustainable models of national unity emerge from inclusive multilingual policies that formally recognize minority languages in education, governance, and public discourse (Nickson, 2010). This approach transforms language from a potential fault line into an instrument of equitable participation. Most of Nigeria's major languages, including Igbo, Yoruba, and Ijo, have been identified through glottochronological studies as sharing genetic links within the Kwa subgroup of the Niger-Congo language family (Williamson & Blench, 2000). This highlights the linguistic commonality among these languages and underscores their shared ancestry. Obafemi (2012) insightfully notes that the profound interrelation among Nigerian languages within the Niger-Congo phylum challenges rigid assertions of ethnic divisions, instead highlighting a substrate of cultural continuity that predates contemporary nationalist frameworks.

The relationship between language and institutional efficiency is equally significant. Public institutions rely on language for effective policy implementation, legal administration, and service delivery. Clear and accessible communication in governance ensures that citizens understand government policies, laws, and regulations, thereby enhancing compliance and reducing bureaucratic inefficiencies (Ihejirika, 2020). In Nigeria, the significance of language in enhancing institutional efficiency is evident in various reform initiatives aimed at improving public service delivery. A notable example is the creation of the Bureau of Public Service Reforms (BPSR) in 2004, which was a strategic move to address inefficiencies within the Nigerian civil service. The BPSR's mandate includes restructuring government ministries, departments, and agencies to promote efficiency and accountability, with a focus on clear communication of policies and services to the public (Bureau of Public Service Reforms, n.d.). This underscores the fundamental role of language in institutional efficiency, as clear and effective communication enhances transparency, fosters public trust, and ensures the seamless implementation of government policies and reforms.

In a similar vein, SERVICOM (Service Compact with All Nigerians), established in 2004, aims to enhance service delivery, bridge the gap between government performance and public expectations, and promote accountability across Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs). It empowers citizens to demand quality services through Service Charters while Ministerial SERVICOM Units (MSUs) develop service standards, complaint systems, and improvement plans to ensure efficiency. For SERVICOM to be truly effective, institutional commitment must be complemented by public awareness and engagement, fostering transparency and responsiveness (SERVICOM, n. d.). Ultimately, clear and accessible communication remains vital to its success, as language plays a fundamental role in ensuring citizens understand their rights, available services, and mechanisms for redress.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper examined the diverse and profound connections between language and national development in Nigeria, highlighting its influence on education, economic growth, and governance. Anchored in Linguistic Relativity and Human Capital theories, the study explored the

role of language in driving national development through literacy and human capital in education, economic mobility and trade/business for economic development, and national cohesion and institutional efficiency within governance frameworks. Education is a driving force for national development, with language serving as its foundation. Literacy, a key indicator of progress, has improved in Nigeria, reaching 69% in 2022. However, significant regional disparities persist, with southern states achieving higher literacy rates than northern states due to socioeconomic barriers and inadequate infrastructure. It was also identified that language proficiency is crucial for human capital development, as it directly impacts educational achievement and economic mobility. Strong language skills enhance productivity, job prospects, and global competitiveness, making education a vital tool for poverty reduction and national growth.

The study demonstrates the pivotal role of language in economic development by enhancing job prospects, trade efficiency, and global competitiveness. English proficiency is linked to higher earnings, improved career mobility, and better integration into international labour markets. Language significantly influences trade and business, serving as a key driver of communication efficiency and economic outcomes. Lastly, language serves as the backbone of governance, enabling policy implementation, national cohesion and institutional efficiency. In multilingual societies like Nigeria, it fosters unity and facilitates communication across diverse groups. Constitutional and development frameworks rely on language to document and operationalise national visions, ensuring effective policy implementation, legal administration, and service delivery.

The study highlights the need for strategic language planning and inclusive policies to maximize the role of language in national development. Strengthening language education in underserved regions is vital for bridging literacy gaps and fostering human capital. Moreover, a cohesive national language strategy is essential for enhancing governance, facilitating economic integration, and improving communication efficiency in trade and business. Clear and accessible language policies will further ensure equitable participation in Nigeria's socio-economic transformation. Future research could examine how language contributes to national development across additional social domains beyond education, economic growth, and governance, uncovering its broader impact on societal progress.

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