Beyond Language Choice: Spoken Language Competence, Literacy Development, and Medium of Instruction in Nigeria

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Abstract

Debates about the medium of instruction in Nigeria tend to focus more on which language schools should use than on how competent learners are in the chosen language. The 2022 National Language Policy prescribed the mother tongue through primary school. Recently, in November 2025, it was cancelled in favour of English at every educational level. This conceptual paper argues that both positions leave a prior question unanswered: what spoken-language resources must learners have, or be helped to build, in whichever language carries instruction? The paper brings together the Simple View of Reading, Psycholinguistic Grain Size Theory and the Not-So-Simple View of Writing to show that spoken language is a continuing resource for reading, spelling, writing and comprehension. The resulting proposition is examined against research on second-language learners and African classrooms. Children taught in an additional language decode almost as well as their first-language peers, but they fall well behind in language comprehension. First-language vocabulary and grammar are only weakly related to those of the second language. In many Nigerian classrooms, the gap is visible in practice, where teachers use two languages throughout primary school regardless of policy. The paper therefore concludes that language choice and language development are separate decisions. It also argues that, until a medium-of-instruction policy specifies how oral language in the chosen medium will be developed, the policy is incomplete. Implications are drawn for policy, teacher education, classroom practice and assessment.

Keywords: Medium of instruction; oral language; literacy development; Simple View of Reading; multilingual education; Nigeria

1. Introduction

In November 2022 Nigeria's Federal Executive Council approved a National Language Policy under which the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community would be the medium of instruction from early childhood education through the six years of primary school (Elumoye, 2022; Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2022). Three years later the National Council on Education cancelled it and declared that English would be the medium of instruction "from primary to tertiary education" (Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation [FMINO], 2025). Each decision was presented as a remedy for poor learning, and each was, in essence, a decision about which language to use. There is no doubt as to the scale of the problem the two policies were meant to address. An estimated 89 per cent of ten-year-olds in sub-Saharan Africa cannot read and understand a simple text (World Bank et al., 2022). The World Bank (2021) estimates that nearly 37 per cent of pupils in low- and middle-income countries are taught in a language they do not understand, and UNESCO (2025) puts the share of people worldwide without access to education in a language they speak and understand at about 40 per cent.

Scholarly debate has largely taken the same form as the policy debate. One body of work argues for instruction in languages children already speak (Bamgbose, 1991; Fafunwa et al., 1989; UNESCO, 2025; World Bank, 2021). Yet, the counter-argument points to the status of English, the number of Nigerian languages, and the cost of materials and teachers (FMINO, 2025). One thing is clear: both sides tend to treat the learner's command of the language as settled once the language has been chosen, without asking the real question: what plans are made to develop the competence required in that language?

This paper examines that assumption. Its claim is that a language becomes a workable medium of instruction only to the extent that learners can understand and use it in speech, and that this dependence does not end when children learn to decode print. The paper argues that selecting a language and developing learners' spoken command of it are two separate decisions. These are referred to here as language choice and language development.

Different scholars have also carried out research work in this regard. For instance, Clegg and Simpson (2016) and Milligan et al. (2016) report that learners in English-medium African classrooms often lack the English needed to follow the curriculum, and they argue for teaching and textbooks that support learners' language. Their main concern is with pedagogy and subject learning.

This paper adds an account, drawn from cognitive models of reading and writing, of which components of spoken language bear on which literacy outcomes. It also shows why the demand differs between English and languages with more consistent spelling. It then applies that account to the Nigerian policy reversal of 2025. The paper does not argue for English, for Nigerian languages or for any particular bilingual model. It proposes, instead, a criterion that any of these options would have to meet. Section 2 describes the conceptual approach and evidence base. Section 3 sets out the Nigerian

policy context. Section 4 brings the three models together. Section 5 examines the resulting proposition against evidence from second-language learners and African classrooms. Section 6 states the argument and its limits, and Section 7 draws implications.

2. Conceptual Approach and Evidence Base

This conceptual article integrates existing theories and relevant bodies of evidence to provide a fuller account of the problem under study (Jaakkola, 2020). It reports no new data and is not a systematic or integrative review. Three models were selected because each explains a different literacy outcome and each assigns an explicit role to spoken language. They are the Simple View of Reading for reading comprehension, Psycholinguistic Grain Size Theory for word reading across orthographies, and the Not-So-Simple View of Writing for composition. The three models are considered through Vygotsky's (1978) account of learning as mediated by language in interaction, since a medium of instruction is first of all the language in which teachers explain and pupils respond.

This theoretical account yields a proposition (Section 4), which is then examined against two bodies of evidence: meta-analytic and longitudinal research on children learning to read in a second language, and studies of reading in multilingual African classrooms, including Nigeria (Section 5). Sources were selected purposively: those that establish the three models, those that provide evidence on second-language and multilingual learners, and those that document the Nigerian medium-of-instruction context. Priority was given to meta-analyses, systematic reviews and longitudinal studies, and the paper makes no claim to exhaustive coverage. Evidence that limits or complicates the proposition was sought deliberately and is set out in Section 6.

3. The Nigerian Policy Context

Nigeria's National Policy on Education prescribes an early transition from a Nigerian language to English. The current edition provides that the medium of instruction in primary school shall be the language of the immediate environment for the first three years in monolingual communities. During that period, English will be taught as a subject, and from the fourth year English shall progressively become the medium of instruction (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013, Section 2, para. 20(d)–(e)). Early-exit transition of this kind is the most common policy choice among multilingual countries of the global South (Trudell, 2023).

The best-known Nigerian trial of a longer period of mother-tongue instruction is the Ife Six-Year Primary Project of the 1970s, in which Yoruba was the medium throughout primary school and English was taught as a subject. Its directors reported favourable results for the Yoruba-medium classes (Fafunwa et al., 1989), and the project has since remained a reference point in Nigerian debate on mother-tongue education (Akinnaso, 1993; Bamgbose, 1991).

As it is, classroom practice has not matched the policy text. A review of policy and practice for the British Council describes what Mbah (2012, as cited in Trudell, 2018, Section 2.2) calls "a de facto language policy environment rather than a de jure one". Instead of a switch to English after Primary 3, the education professionals consulted for the review reported that "both languages are being mixed throughout all six primary grades" (Trudell, 2018, Section 4.3). A follow-up study in eight states across the six geopolitical zones reached the same conclusion from classroom observation and interviews: code-switching was "the primary means used for including both languages of instruction", and it covered "all of primary grades and all subjects, from P1 to P6" (UNICEF Nigeria, 2022, p. 18). Pupil proficiency assessments reported in the study, averaged across the eight states, rated about two-thirds of Primary 3 and Primary 4 pupils proficient in literacy and numeracy when the language of the immediate environment was used, and fewer than half when English was used (UNICEF Nigeria, 2022, Table 6). Teaching materials in Nigerian languages were reported to be scarce in every grade.

The 2022 National Language Policy lengthened the mother-tongue period. It prescribed the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community as the medium of instruction from early childhood education through the six years of primary school, with English taught as a subject. From junior secondary school English was to be the language of instruction, with combined use of English and the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community encouraged (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2022). Announcing its approval, the Minister of Education conceded that full implementation would have to wait for instructional materials and qualified teachers (Elumoye, 2022). In November 2025 the Federal Government announced that the 69th National Council on Education, meeting in Akure, had cancelled the policy. English would be the medium "from primary to tertiary education", and a new Inclusive Language Policy would encourage the teaching of at least one Nigerian language alongside it (FMINO, 2025). The reasons given were the

number of indigenous languages, limited learning materials, inadequate teacher preparation, unequal adoption among states, and a "weak transition from mother tongue to English" associated with poor examination results. The same statement describes the cancelled policy as prescribing the mother tongue for Primary 1 to 3, whereas the policy document itself prescribes it through Primary 6. This paper follows the 2022 document in describing what the policy formally prescribed. The disagreement between the two official accounts is itself a sign of how unsettled the policy was. The Nigerian Academy of Letters responded that the fault lay in implementation and not in the policy, and called for it to be reinstated (APA News, 2025).

The reasons the Government gave are not arguments about the merits of English or of Nigerian languages. Shortages of materials and teachers and a failed transition are arguments about whether learners were equipped to learn through the language placed in front of them. That is the argument the rest of this paper pursues; it also applies to the policy that has replaced the one cancelled.

4. Spoken Language as a Continuing Resource: Three Models

4.1 The Simple View of Reading

The Simple View of Reading holds that reading comprehension is the product of decoding and linguistic comprehension, so that neither is sufficient alone (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990).

Decoding is the ability to turn print into the words it represents. Linguistic comprehension is the ability to understand those words and sentences when they are spoken. A child who decodes accurately but does not understand the language decoded will not comprehend the text. Longitudinal research supports both components and shows how their weight shifts. Oral language and decoding make separate contributions to comprehension (Kendeou et al., 2009). Code-related skills such as print knowledge and phonological awareness are the main predictors of reading in the first years of school, and oral language carries more of the load thereafter (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Verhoeven & van Leeuwe, 2012). In a five-year study that followed children from the age of seven and a half, Lervåg et al. (2018) found that listening comprehension and decoding together accounted for almost all the variation in early reading comprehension, and that listening comprehension predicted its later growth.

The model has been criticised as incomplete. For example, Duke and Cartwright (2021) point out that decoding and language comprehension overlap and that readers' active self-regulation contributes. Still, this does not remove the point on which the present argument rests. Systematic instruction in decoding is well supported by evidence (Castles et al., 2018; Ehri et al., 2001), but it cannot produce comprehension of a language the reader does not understand.

4.2 Psycholinguistic Grain Size Theory

Psycholinguistic Grain Size Theory explains why learning to decode is not equally difficult in every written language (Ziegler & Goswami, 2005). Where each letter reliably represents one sound, small units are enough. Where spelling is inconsistent, as in English, readers must also learn larger units such as rimes and whole-word patterns. Seymour et al. (2003), for instance, compared early reading in English with a range of other European orthographies and found that foundation-level decoding developed in English at less than half the rate observed in the consistent orthographies. Across five languages, Ziegler et al. (2010) found that phonological awareness predicted reading in every one, but more strongly in the less consistent orthographies. A meta-analysis of the Simple View likewise found that the relative influence of decoding and linguistic comprehension in early reading differs with the type of orthography (Florit & Cain, 2011).

This is significant for a country like Nigeria. First, a child learning to read in English faces a longer period of learning to decode than a child learning to read in a consistently spelled language, whatever his or her command of spoken English. Second, methods for teaching reading cannot simply be carried over from English to Nigerian languages or the reverse. Trudell and Schroeder (2007) argue that reading methods developed for European languages need to be matched to the linguistic and orthographic features of African languages. To the extent that the approved orthographies of Nigerian languages map sound to symbol more consistently than English does, the theory predicts faster early decoding in those languages. It predicts nothing about comprehension, which depends on the other component of the Simple View.

4.3 The Not-So-Simple View of Writing

According to Berninger and Winn's (2006) Not-So-Simple View of Writing, composition is the coordination of transcription (spelling and handwriting), text generation (turning ideas into words and sentences) and executive functions such as planning and revising, within limited working memory. As described by McCutchen (1996), when

transcription or sentence formulation is effortful, it takes up capacity that planning and elaboration need.

Text generation is a spoken-language process: a writer needs words, the grammar to combine them and the discourse knowledge to order them. Hence, a pupil writing in an additional language must find all three in that language while also managing spelling. This has close links with reading, as reading and writing draw on shared knowledge (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000). Learning to spell a word secures the connections among its letters, sounds and meaning that allow it to be read at sight (Ehri, 2014). Instruction in morphology also improves literacy outcomes (Bowers et al., 2010).

4.4 What the Three Models Show

The three models describe different but connected aspects of literacy development. Phonology links speech to print, and it matters most at the outset and most in inconsistent orthographies. Vocabulary, grammar and morphology determine whether decoded words are understood and whether ideas can be put into sentences. Discourse knowledge supports the comprehension and composition of extended text. None of these is finished when decoding begins, and the relation runs in both directions: Mol and Bus (2011) describe a spiral in which better readers read more and thereby gain further language and reading skill. Table 1 summarises the four components, what each contributes, and what follows for any medium of instruction.

Table 1
Spoken-Language Resources, Their Contribution to Literacy, and the Implication for Any Medium of Instruction

Component of spoken language	Contribution to literacy	Relevant theoretical model(s)	Implication for the medium of instruction
Phonology	Links speech to print; supports decoding and spelling, most of all at the outset and in inconsistent orthographies	Simple View of Reading (decoding); Psycholinguistic Grain Size Theory	Systematic teaching of decoding in the language of the text, over a longer period in English than in consistently spelled languages
Vocabulary	Determines whether decoded words are understood; supplies the words needed to generate text	Simple View of Reading (linguistic comprehension); Not-So-Simple View of Writing (text generation)	Sustained and explicit teaching of vocabulary in the medium, in every subject
Grammar and morphology	Support the understanding of sentences and the forming of sentences in writing; morphology also supports reading and spelling	Simple View of Reading (linguistic comprehension); Not-So-Simple View of Writing (text generation)	Teaching of sentence structure and word formation alongside reading and writing
Discourse knowledge	Supports the comprehension and composition of extended text	Simple View of Reading (linguistic comprehension); Not-So-Simple View of Writing (text generation and planning)	Extended talk, explanation and discussion treated as part of literacy teaching

A sociocultural perspective brings classroom interaction into this account. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning proceeds through interaction with more capable others, and that interaction is conducted in language. Explanation, questioning and feedback are the means by which teachers build the resources the three models identify. When the medium is one in which pupils cannot yet take part in such talk, the channel for developing their language is narrowed at the point where it is most needed.

The proposition that follows can be stated directly. In any medium of instruction, literacy and academic learning depend in important part on

learners' spoken-language resources in that medium. Where the medium is not the learners' strongest language, word reading may develop adequately while comprehension and written expression lag, unless oral language in the medium is deliberately built. The next section examines whether evidence from second-language learners bears this out.

5. Evidence from Second-Language Learners and African Classrooms

5.1 Decoding Keeps Pace; Comprehension Does Not

The pattern the proposition predicts is one of the most consistent findings in research on second-language reading. Melby-Lervåg and Lervåg (2014) pooled studies comparing first- and second-language learners. Second-language learners were close to their peers in phonological awareness (d = - 0.08) and decoding (d = - 0.12), moderately behind in reading comprehension (d = - 0.62) and far behind in language comprehension (d = - 1.12). The National Literacy Panel in the United States had reached a similar conclusion: language-minority pupils often match native speakers in word-level skills but seldom do so in reading comprehension and writing, and their oral proficiency in the second language is closely related to their literacy in it (August & Shanahan, 2006).

Longitudinal studies show the gap persisting. Among Dutch pupils followed through the primary grades, the difference between first- and second-language learners in word decoding was no longer significant by Grade 5, but second-language learners remained behind in listening and reading comprehension (Verhoeven & van Leeuwe, 2012). Lervåg and Aukrust (2010) found that vocabulary, and not decoding, predicted growth in reading comprehension, and that it lay behind the difference in growth between first- and second-language learners.

5.2 Cross-Linguistic Relations

It might be objected that children bring language with them, and that strong oral skills in a first language will carry over to a second. Cummins's (1979) interdependence hypothesis proposes that proficiency developed in one language supports development in the other, and for some skills the evidence agrees. In a meta-analysis of cross-linguistic correlations, Melby-Lervåg and Lervåg (2011) found moderate to large relations between first- and second-language phonological awareness and decoding. They found only a small relation between oral language in the first and second languages, and a relation close to zero between first-language oral language and second-language reading comprehension.

These are correlations. They do not establish a causal mechanism, and they do not show what teaching could achieve. They are consistent with the view that what a child has learned about how print works carries over more readily than vocabulary and grammar, which largely have to be acquired in the new language. Cummins's (2008) distinction between conversational fluency and academic language proficiency points the same way. A pupil who manages routine classroom exchanges in English may still lack the language of textbooks and examinations.

5.3 African Classrooms

Studies in African schools show the same dissociation under harder conditions. Piper, Schroeder, and Trudell (2016) analysed assessments of 2,000 Kenyan pupils in two or three languages: English, Kiswahili and a mother tongue, Dholuo or Gikuyu. Many read English words more easily than words in the African languages, yet their reading comprehension was significantly lower in English. Kim and Piper (2019) examined the component skills of reading in Kiswahili, Kikamba and Lubukusu, all of which have transparent orthographies, at the end of Grade 2. The skills were related in similar ways in all three languages, as the models predict, but 75 per cent of the Kiswahili sample, 76 per cent of the Kikamba sample and 87 per cent of the Lubukusu sample scored zero on reading comprehension. Consistent spelling and a familiar language did not by themselves produce reading for meaning.

Teaching made a difference. In a randomised controlled trial in Kenya, a programme that taught literacy in the mother tongue as well as in English and Kiswahili produced effects on mother-tongue literacy averaging between 0.3 and 0.6 standard deviations, although implementation was difficult because many educators did not speak the languages concerned (Piper, Zuilkowski, & Ong'ele, 2016). On the English-medium side, Clegg and Simpson (2016) conclude that many learners in sub-Saharan Africa do not have sufficient English to achieve grade-appropriate subject knowledge, and a Rwandan study found that textbooks and teaching designed to support pupils' English improved outcomes in Primary 4 (Milligan et al., 2016).

5.4 Nigeria

Nigerian evidence is thinner and mostly descriptive, but it is consistent with the pattern. Trudell (2018) reported that fluency in standard Nigerian English was uncommon in rural and less

affluent families and classrooms, that the English of primary teachers was itself a serious concern, and that pupils' limited English obliged teachers to go on using the mother tongue well into the upper primary grades. The eight-state study found teachers in every primary grade switching between English and a Nigerian language, with little material in Nigerian languages to support them (UNICEF Nigeria, 2022).

Teachers switch languages for several pedagogical and social reasons. Even so, code-switching on this scale, in every grade and subject, is consistent with a gap between the official medium and the language through which pupils can learn. It is also unplanned: nothing in it ensures that pupils' English, or their literacy in the Nigerian language, is being built systematically. No Nigerian study was located that measures oral language, decoding and comprehension in both languages for the same children. That is the study the present argument most needs.

6. Language Choice Is Not Language Development

The evidence supports the proposition and makes it more precise. Choosing a medium of instruction settles which language teachers are told to use. It does not settle whether pupils can understand that language when it is spoken, and the comprehension of what is read and the ability to write depend on exactly that. Language choice and language development are different decisions, and Nigerian policy has repeatedly made the first without the second.

The policy now in force illustrates the point. English-medium instruction from Primary 1 asks most pupils to learn to decode an inconsistent orthography, in a language whose vocabulary and grammar they are still acquiring, and often from teachers who are not secure in it themselves. The research reviewed above suggests the likely outcome: word reading that can be brought to an acceptable level, and comprehension that does not follow. The Government's own diagnosis of a "weak transition from mother tongue to English" (FMINO, 2025) is consistent with this account. Moving the transition to the first day of school does not in itself strengthen pupils' English; pupils are then required to learn through English while they are still acquiring it.

The same test applies to mother-tongue instruction. Children's spoken command of the language of their community is a resource that English-medium schooling leaves unused, and grain size theory suggests that decoding should come more readily in a consistently spelled language. The Kenyan evidence reviewed above indicates, however, that this is not sufficient in itself. Pupils need the academic register of that language, books to read in it, and teachers who speak it and have been prepared to teach in it. Because English remains the language of later schooling and of examinations, they also need oral English taught as a subject for long enough to learn through it afterwards. Without a plan for developing English, a mother-tongue policy is likely to defer the difficulty to the point of transition, and an English-medium policy is likely to meet it from the first year.

Three limits on the argument should be stated. First, it is not an argument for delaying literacy until oral proficiency is in place. Oral language and literacy develop together and support each other, and systematic teaching of decoding remains necessary in any language. Second, building oral language is slow. In a systematic review of 43 studies, Rogde et al. (2019) found that instruction in linguistic comprehension produced small gains in vocabulary and grammar and moderate gains in narrative and listening comprehension, with no immediate effect on generalised measures of reading comprehension. Children's language can be improved by teaching (Hulme et al., 2020), and oral-language and phonological programmes improve different skills (Bowyer-Crane et al., 2008), but the realistic expectation is of sustained provision over years, which is a further reason to plan for it. Third, most of the component-level evidence comes from Europe and North America, and the African studies cited are few. The proposition is offered as the most defensible reading of that evidence for Nigeria, and it is open to empirical test.

7. Implications

7.1 Policy

Every medium-of-instruction decision should be accompanied by a language-development plan for the chosen medium. Such a plan would state what oral proficiency pupils are expected to have on entry, what the school will add in each year, in how many timetabled hours, with what materials, and taught by whom. Under the present English-medium policy this implies sustained, timetabled and explicit teaching of oral English from Primary 1. The evidence reviewed here does not establish how much is needed; that is a question for the research proposed in Section 7.4. It also implies a planned use of the language pupils understand to explain content, in place of the unplanned code-switching that now fills the gap.

The Inclusive Language Policy's provision for a Nigerian language as a subject deserves more

weight than it has been given. Decoding skills are closely related across languages (Melby-Lervåg & Lervåg, 2011) and are likely to be acquired faster in a consistent orthography (Seymour et al., 2003; Ziegler & Goswami, 2005). Teaching children to read in the Nigerian language they speak, alongside English, is therefore a way of securing decoding while their spoken English is being built.

7.2 Teacher Education and Classroom Practice

Teachers need to be able to tell a decoding difficulty from a language-comprehension difficulty, because the two call for different responses. Initial and in-service teacher education should prepare primary teachers to teach vocabulary, sentence structure and extended talk as part of every subject, and to treat oral explanation and discussion as part of literacy teaching. Language-supportive textbooks and lesson routines of the kind trialled in Rwanda offer one tested model (Milligan et al., 2016). In writing, the capacity account suggests letting pupils rehearse content orally before they write, so that formulating sentences and transcribing them do not compete for attention at the same moment (McCutchen, 1996). Since teachers' own English is a reported concern (Trudell, 2018), any plan for pupils' English has to include teachers' English.

7.3 Assessment

Schools and assessment bodies should measure listening comprehension alongside word reading and reading comprehension, in English and, where possible, in the language pupils speak at home. Adequate decoding with weak comprehension is the expected profile of a second-language learner (Melby-Lervåg & Lervåg, 2014) and should not, by itself, be interpreted as evidence of a reading disability. A pupil who cannot decode in either language after adequate teaching presents a different problem. Assessments that report only English reading scores cannot distinguish a child who cannot read from a child who cannot yet understand English.

7.4 Research

Three kinds of study could test or refine the proposition directly in Nigeria. The first would measure oral language, decoding and reading comprehension in English and in a Nigerian language for the same pupils across the primary years. The second would compare the consistency of the approved orthographies of Nigerian languages with that of English, and relate it to rates of early decoding. The third would trial structured oral-English and oral-Nigerian-language teaching alongside reading instruction and follow pupils long enough to detect effects on comprehension.

8. Conclusion

Nigeria has changed its policy on the language of primary education twice in three years, and each change has been defended as a route to better learning. This paper has argued that the choice of language, in either direction, does not by itself determine learning. The three established models of literacy considered here show that reading comprehension, spelling and writing draw throughout schooling on vocabulary, grammar, morphology and discourse knowledge in the language of the text. Research on second-language learners confirms that these are the resources such learners most often lack, that decoding does not supply them, and that they are only weakly related to oral language in the first language.

The policy conclusion is conditional and applies to any medium. A language named in policy becomes a medium of learning only when schools take responsibility for developing pupils' spoken command of it over a period of years. Whether Nigeria retains English from Primary 1, returns to Nigerian languages, or adopts a bilingual arrangement, the measure of the policy should be the same: whether it states how that development will be achieved.

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