



Language in Education Policy Debates in Africa Today

Prosperous Nankindu & Henry Hollan Ssembatya

Kyambogo University, Uganda

Article History

Received: 29.08.2025

Revised: 10.02.2026

Accepted: 18.02.2026

Published: 24.02.2026

Keywords

Education policy

Medium of instruction

Mother tongue

Multilingual

How to cite:

Nankindu, P., & Ssembatya, H. H. (2026). Language in Education Policy Debates in Africa Today. *Journal of Linguistics, Literary and Communication Studies*, 5(1), 13-24.

Copyright © 2026



Abstract

Through critical research methods using document analysis, this study investigated the current Language in Education Policy (LiEP) debates in Africa. There are many such debates going on across the continent, but the literature available is very thin. Three multilingual African countries, the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the Republic of Congo, and the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, were selected for the study. The study found that colonial languages are dominant and are the languages mainly used as media of instruction in schools and languages of assessment in the sampled countries. Although three countries were selected, the debates are not any different in the rest of the African countries. The findings of this research are generalisable to the situation across the entire continent, thus critical in influencing future LiEP on the continent. It is imperative to note that the use of colonial languages in education should not be at the expense of African languages.

Introduction

Africa is home to approximately one-third of the world's languages. The number of native languages in Africa is estimated between 1250 and 2100, and some counts indicate 3,000 (<https://alp.fas.harvard.edu/introduction-african-languages>). Maho (2004, p. 279) estimates that there are 1000-2000 languages in Africa. Maho adds that, mainly, it is the Summer Institute of Linguistics' (SIL) work that is relied upon, due to the lack of any other source with comparable coverage. On the other hand, McLaughlin (2009, p. 7) and Lodhi (1993, p. 79) estimated that, out of 6200 languages and dialects worldwide, Africa alone has 2582 languages and 1382 dialects.

The diversity of Africa's languages is evidenced by its populations. In total, at least 75 languages in Africa have more than 1 million speakers. According to the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN, 2026), the most widely spoken languages are: Kiswahili with 200 million speakers, Arabic with 150 million, Yoruba with 45 million, Fula with 35 million, and Igbo with 30 million. The rest are spoken by populations ranging from a few hundred to several hundred thousand speakers. Unlike the languages of other continents, most African languages are living, meaning they are used and spoken by people for day-to-day communication. Different authors, possibly with different intentions, provide different estimates, with varying ranges. The table below summarises the number of languages in Africa from different authors.



Table 1: Estimates of Numbers of African Languages Drawn from Available Sources

Year	Source	Languages
2026	Encyclopedia Britannica	1,500-2,000
2026	Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics	Over 2,000
2026	Wikipedia	2,000
2025	ACALAN	Over 2,000
2025	UNESCO	1,500-3,000
2022	SIL Ethnologue 25 th ed	2,500
2000	SIL Ethnologue 14 th ed	2,058
1997	Encyclopedia of Africa South of the Sahara	1,500
1997	Encyclopedia of Precolonial Africa	1,500
1996	SIL Ethnologue 13 th ed	2,011
1995	Encyclopedia of World Cultures	2,500
1994	Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics	2,000
1992	Dictionary of Language and Linguistics	1,000-3,000
1992	Countries, People and their Languages	1,300
1992	SIL Ethnologue 12 th ed	1,995
1989	Encyclopedia of Americana	1,000
1984	SIL Ethnologue 10 th ed	1,727
1997	Language Map of Africa and Adjacent Islands	1,250-2500
1974	Encyclopedia Britannica	1,000

Note: Part of the Information in the Table is from Maho (2004, p. 280).

According to the table above, the languages of Africa are, on average, 2000 years old. Most of these languages are primarily oral with little available in written form. These are broken down into four large families, with an additional Austronesian family spoken in Madagascar; the four continental language families are: Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan, Afroasiatic and Khoisan. Niger-Congo, with approximately 1,350-1,650 languages, is the largest of the four language families and the largest in the world. The Niger-Congo languages are the most widely spoken in Africa; they include Swahili (200 million), Yoruba (45 million), Igbo (30 million), and Fula (35 million). The next-largest family is Afroasiatic, with about 200-300-member languages in Africa. The Afroasiatic languages in Africa are mainly found in the Northern regions.

Next in size is the Nilo-Saharan family with about 80 languages. These occupy Eastern Africa and the North-Eastern region of Africa. Last but not least is the Khoisan family in Southern Africa, with between 40 and 70 languages. It is believed to be the oldest and the smallest of the four language families. The countries with the highest number of languages are: Nigeria, with 520; Cameroon, with 227; the Democratic Republic of Congo, with 214; and Chad, with 129. The countries with the fewest languages are Western Sahara, Burundi, and Seychelles, all with 04 (Statista, 2024).

Across the world, everyday language issues are shaped by histories of contact through migration or colonialism, with contemporary global flows giving rise to new multilingual dispensations. Communities and speakers relate to these linguistic dynamics in various ways, either through institutions specifically designed for such purposes or through everyday personal grassroots practices. Africa is at a crossroads regarding the historical dynamics of language (colonialism) and the state of the language resulting from contemporary global developments. Thus, any discussion of language policy and planning in education needs to be seen against both these dynamic backgrounds. Three questions guided the study: (i) What is the language landscape of the selected countries? (ii) What is the LiEP of the selected countries? And (iii) What are the current LiEP debates in the selected



countries? Before we delve into the specific languages used in education and the debates surrounding them, let us briefly provide a background on the countries selected for the study.

The Federal Republic of Nigeria

Nigeria is a country located on the western coast of Africa. Nigeria has a diverse geography, with climates ranging from arid to humid equatorial. However, Nigeria's most diverse feature is its people. Hundreds of languages are spoken in the country, including Yoruba, Igbo, Fula, Hausa, Edo, Ibibio, Tiv, and English. The country has abundant natural resources, notably large petroleum deposits (Ajayi et al., 2026). The national capital is Abuja, in the Federal Capital Territory, which was created by decree in 1976. Lagos, the former capital, retains its standing as the country's leading commercial and industrial city. Modern Nigeria dates back to 1914, when the British Protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria were united. The country became independent on October 1, 1960, and in 1963 adopted a republican constitution but elected to stay a member of the Commonwealth.

Republic of Congo

The Republic of Congo is a former French colony which gained independence in 1960. It is a 342,000-square-kilometre country with a population of just over 7 million inhabitants situated astride the Equator in west-central Africa. Officially known as the Republic of the Congo, the country is often called Congo-Brazzaville, with its capital added parenthetically, to distinguish it from neighbouring Democratic Republic of the Congo, which is often referred to as DRC or Congo-Kinshasa. Congo-Brazzaville as a whole is sparsely populated, with more than half of its population living in cities. The most populous city is the capital, Brazzaville, located in the south-eastern corner of the country and a major inland port on the Congo River (Cordell, 2026).

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania

Mauritania, officially the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, is a sovereign country in Northwest Africa. It is located on the Atlantic coast of Africa. Culturally, it forms a transitional zone between the Arab-Amazigh (Berber) populations of North Africa and the African peoples in the region south of the Tropic of Cancer, known as the Sudan (a name derived from Arabic *bilād al-sūdān*, "land of the Blacks"). Mauritania was administered as a French colony during the first half of the 20th century and became independent on November 28, 1960. Under the constitution, Islam is the official state religion, but the republic guarantees freedom of conscience and religious liberty to all. Arabic is the official language; Fula, Soninke, and Wolof are national languages. The capital, Nouakchott, is located in the southwestern part of the country. Mauritania is the 11th-largest country in Africa, and the 28th-largest in the world, and 90% of its territory is situated in the Sahara. Mauritania's population is estimated at 4,690,000 (Gerteiny et al., 2025).

Methodology

This article is a product of critical document analysis using a qualitative approach. According to Alvesson & Deetz (2020), critical research requires the researcher to apply critical and reflexive qualities throughout the research process. It emphasises challenging, disrupting, and systematically questioning established assumptions, using either partial ethnography, reflexive interpretation, or a focus on how language and discourse construct reality as key techniques. The article conducted a critical review of readily available online information about the three selected African countries. A random sample of African francophone, anglophone, and Maghreb/Arabic countries was selected. Three countries were selected for the current study: Anglophone Nigeria, Francophone Congo-Brazzaville and the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. The following three questions guided the critical reading and interpretation of the selected countries: (i) What is the language landscape of the selected



country? (ii) What is the LiEP of the selected country? And (iii) What are the current LiEP debates in the selected country? These questions were ably answered in the sections ahead.

Theorisation of the study

The study was guided by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a theory rooted in critical theory. It emerged in the late 20th century, drawing on the work of influential scholars such as Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, and Teun van Dijk. CDA aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony (Fairclough, 1995, p. 132-133). The framework was used for language policy analysis (Fairclough, 2010; Kovacs & Wodak, 2003; Wodak, 2002; Wodak et al., 1999; Fairclough, 1995; Lamke, 1995;) to explore the relationships between texts, discursive practices and events (Wodak, 2006). It shows how texts construct representations of the world, social relationships and social identities. It attempts to discover traces of ideological bias in texts, emphasising how such practices and texts are ideologically shaped by relations of power (Fairclough, 1989).

Results from the Analysis

The section below presents the findings from the document analysis of debates in those countries. Three research questions guided the analysis. These questions were: (i) What is the language landscape of the selected country? (ii) What is the LiEP of the selected country? And (iii) What are the current LiEP debates in the selected country? The first country to be handled was the Federal Republic of Nigeria, followed by the Republic of Congo and the Islamic Republic of Mauritania.

The Federal Republic of Nigeria

This section handles the following research questions: What is the language landscape of the Federal Republic of Nigeria? (ii) What is the LiEP of the Federal Republic of Nigeria? And (iii) What are the current LiEP debates in the Federal Republic of Nigeria?

The Languages landscape of the Federal Republic of Nigeria

Different researchers estimate the number of languages spoken in Nigeria at 150-521 (Obiakor, 2024; Bamgbose, 2005; Okebukola et al., 2013). The languages of Nigeria are classified into three broad linguistic groups: Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan, and Afro-Asiatic. The huge Niger-Congo group is further subdivided into nine major branches, including the Kwa subgroup, spoken in the extreme southwestern corner of the country; the Ijoid branch, spoken in the Niger -Delta region; the Atlantic subgroup, which most notably includes Fula; the extensive Benue-Congo subgroup, which includes Tiv, Jukun, Edo, Igbo, Igala, Idoma, Nupe, Gwari, Yoruba, and several languages of the Cross River basin such as Efik, Ibibio, Anang, and Ekoi; and the Adamawa -Ubangi languages, such as Awak, Waja, Waka, and Tula, spoken in northern Nigeria. The Nilo-Saharan group is represented in Nigeria principally by Kanuri, although speakers of Bagirmi and Zerma are also present. Afro-Asiatic is a much larger linguistic group and comprises Hausa, Margi, and Bade, among others (Adegbija, 2004: 3). Some peoples (such as the Fulani and the Tiv) are relatively recent immigrants, but, on the basis of modern linguistic research, it is thought that the great majority of Nigerian languages—specifically the Kwa subgroup—have been spoken in roughly the same locations for some 4,000 years. Out of a population of about 200 million, Igbo is predominantly spoken in the southeast by about 27 million people; Yoruba is predominantly spoken in the southwest by about 40 million people; and Hausa is predominantly spoken in the north by about 60 million people (Statista, 2024).



Language in Education Policy of the Federal Republic of Nigeria

Despite the range of languages spoken amongst the different ethnic groups, Nigeria does not have a distinct language policy document for the education sector, but it has a language policy included in the National Policy on Education (NPE), which serves as a guiding framework for developing and implementing education in the country (Obiakor, 2024, p. 3). In Nigeria, language policy in education dates back to the colonial era, when, in 1927, the British Advisory Committee on native education in tropical Africa recommended that indigenous languages serve as the medium of instruction in the lower years of primary education. Language policy in education has remained a contemporary concern in highly multiethnic and multilingual Nigeria, where about 500 indigenous languages are spoken within its borders (Blench, 2012, p. 38). The English, the official language, was the medium of instruction before the National Policy on Education advocated the use of indigenous languages in basic education.

Current Language in Education Policy Debates in Nigeria

- (i) *Are the language policies clear and implemented? Despite wide evidence of the benefits of Mother Tongue Medium in early grade learning, this has remained a predicament for Nigeria. The use of the first language as a medium of instruction in early formal education, and the requirement that every Nigerian child learns one of the three constitutionally recognised languages in addition to his or her own language and English (Bamgbose, 1977, p. 20) as cited by Adegbija (2004, p. 36).*
- (ii) *Can Nigeria do without English? English is one of the big four and is still a very high value language in Nigeria for official and other businesses (Obiakor, 2024; Adegbija, 2004). The future of English language in the Nigerian educational sector is very bright and it should not be interrupted.*
- (iii) *How can Nigeria continue to develop textbooks and other relevant teaching materials for indigenous languages and implement multilingual education? Many studies (Iyamu, 2007; Bilewumo, 2008; OlaOlorun, Ikonta & Adeosun 2013 & Fakeye, Aiyede & Fakeye, 2017) as cited in Okwudilichukwu Ugwu (2020, p. 6) have shown a negative attitude of Nigerian parents towards the use of Mother Tongue with a corresponding preference for English as the medium of instruction in schools although some Nigerians both parents and students want to identify with their home/indigenous languages (Obiakor, 2024, p. 3).*
- (iv) *How can Nigeria deal with the shortage of teachers of indigenous languages? This is another issue under contention and how can Nigeria improve teacher competences in the use of indigenous languages to handle school subjects? Teachers do not have capacity for multilingual education.*
- (v) *How can the National Policy on Education (NPE) be implemented and or enforced other than leaving it on shelf? The NPE stipulates multilingual education. Such a provision has remained an object of criticism, rejection, and is therefore not implemented. (Okwudilichukwu Ugwu, 2020, p. 1). There is a significant gap between policy formulation, implementation, and enforcement (Obiakor, 2024, p. 11).*

The Republic of Congo- Congo-Brazzaville

By the end of this section, the research questions about the Republic of Congo shall be answered. These are; (i) What is the language landscape of the Republic of Congo? (ii) What is the LiEP of the Republic of Congo? And (iii) What are the current LiEP debates in the Republic of Congo?



Languages of the Republic of Congo

Except for the Pygmies and the Adamawa-Ubangi-speaking populations in the northeast, the indigenous peoples all speak Bantu languages. Some of these are: Lingala (Ngala), Luba-Kasai (Tshiluba), Kituba, a Bantu creole, Kongo (Kikongo), Luba-Katanga (Kiluba), Songe (Lusonge), Nande (Orundandi) and Tetela (Otetela). Intergroup communication and trade fostered the development of two trade languages; Lingala and Kituba (Mono kutuba). Lingala is spoken north of Brazzaville, and Kituba is common in the area between the capital and the coast. French is the official language and the medium of educational instruction, as well as the language of the upper classes (Cordell, 2026).

The Language in Education Policy of the Republic of Congo

It is important to note that there is very little literature on language in education in the Republic of Congo. French is the official language of the country, dating back to its colonial period under Belgian rule. However, there is a rapid increase in the number of Chinese-speaking Congolese alumni of Chinese universities, who often trained in technical fields, and Congolese traders who learned Chinese as part of their business activities (Bagamboula, 2022). It is important to note that by 2000, China was the leading market for Congolese exports.

Current Language in Education Policy Debates in the Republic of Congo

- (i) *Will French in future remain a language of prestige and an official language in Congo-Brazzaville? Can the history of education language policies in Congo be decolonised? Tsoumou (2024, p. 1) states that, although the status of language policy remains unchanged both during and after the colonial era, with French enjoying all high-status and transactional privileges among elites, there is a growing awareness among scholars that having French as the sole official language in Congo-Brazzaville is inadequate.*
- (ii) *Whether to promote indigenous languages over French or otherwise? Tsoumou, (2024, p. 1) states further that, "voices are now being heard in Congress urging and encouraging the use of local languages. This inadequacy is also the reason why on the scale of the most and the least valued languages in Congo-Brazzaville, French and ethnic languages tend to be associated with the two extremes of the same spectrum, where, on the one hand, French is overly the most valued, and, on the other hand, ethnic languages are the least valued".*
- (iii) *Should the teaching of Chinese be included in the language policy for teacher training and for teaching in schools? Chinese importance in trade and business in Congo -Brazzaville is growing. An effect of increased trade was, of course, an increased need for communication between the peoples of China and Congo, in order to maximise trading opportunities. This clearly challenges the domination of French. It is now clear that French is no longer the sole language through which development and engagement with the world can be achieved (Bagamboula, n.d: 174-176).*
- (iv) *The very low literacy levels among learners, very high repetition rates and poor teacher retention in primary schools are big issues. In addition, teacher interest in primary schools and capacity to creatively use more than one language during teaching is still wanting. In conferences and education related meetings, talks are about how to improve teacher retention, motivation and Continuous Professional Development Programmes (Broken Chalk, 2026).*

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania

This section handles the findings of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania: (i) What is the language landscape of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania? (ii) What is the LiEP of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania? And (iii) What are the current LiEP debates in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania?



Languages of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania

Arabic is the official language of Mauritania; Fula, Soninke, and Wolof are recognised as national languages. The Moors speak Ḥassāniyyah Arabic, a dialect that draws most of its grammar from Arabic and uses a vocabulary of both Arabic and Arabized Amazigh words. Most Ḥassāniyyah speakers are also familiar with colloquial Egyptian and Syrian Arabic due to the influence of television and radio broadcasts from the Middle East. One result of Mauritanian Arabic being drawn into the mainstream of the Arabic-speaking world has been a revalorization of Ḥassāniyyah forms in personal names, especially evident in the use of “Ould” or “Wuld” (“Son of”) in male names. The Tukulor and the Fulani in the Senegal River basin speak Fula (Fulfulde, Pular), a language of the Atlantic branch of the Niger-Congo family. The other ethnic groups have retained their respective languages, which are also part of the Niger-Congo family: Soninke (Mande branch) and Wolof (Atlantic branch). Since the late 1980s, Arabic has been the primary language of instruction in schools throughout the country, slowly ending a long-standing advantage formerly held by the French-schooled populations of the SÉNÉGAL River valley (Deschamps et al., 2025).

Language in Education Policy of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania

Currently, the languages of instruction are exclusively Arabic and French (Taine-Cheikh, 2023, p. 300). Arabic is the language of instruction beginning in the first year of primary school, and French is introduced as a foreign language in the second year. At the secondary level, all science and math courses are taught in French. The politicisation and racialisation of Arabic, a language that was widely used by pre-colonial African intellectuals and is still accorded a special liturgical status by many in Muslim West Africa, finds its roots in colonial language and educational policies. The French—in contrast to the policies they pursued in other parts of the region—adopted two distinct language and education policies in Mauritania: one for the non-Arabic-speaking population in the south, and the other for the Arab-Berber tribes in the rest of the country. The former relied strictly on the French language and educational system, while the latter accommodated Arabic and connected Hassaniya-speaking Mauritians (who hailed from both Arab and Berber backgrounds and were therefore linked to Arabic in different ways) to the Arab world. This colonial process involved, on one level, bringing North African teachers to these colonial-run schools or *médersas* and framing Arabic as an identity language while, on another level, denying Afro-Mauritanian students the opportunity to study Arabic (Adou, 2024, p. 10).

Current Language in Education Policy Debates of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania

- (i) *How can Mauritania deal with ethnic tensions, which have been at the heart of the country's language educational policy? (Naciri Azzouz, 2024). Since the country's independence in 1960, Black Mauritanian communities have denounced what they call the cultural hegemony of Arabic, the official language spoken by the majority of the population and have called for their languages to be elevated to the rank of official language. If languages such as Hassanya, Peul, Soninké and French are used in the country, why does Arabic remain the sole official language? Ahmed (2025, p. 5).*
- (ii) *How can Mauritania deal with harsh and divided views over the use of Arabic and French as the country's common languages? This is a symptom of ancestral mistrust and power struggles between Mauritians of African descent and those of Arab origin. Proposal to introduce compulsory Arabic as the only official lingua franca in the country. 'Negro-Mauritians' insist that the official use of French and Arabic as the country's bilingual common languages should be retained. The country's Constitution recognises Arabic as the only official language. The 'Negro-Mauritians' refer to this as Arabisation (University World News, 2026).*



- (iii) *How can Mauritania deal with educational reforms which have always focused on Arabic and French, downsizing national languages such as Pulaar, Wolof and Soninke? Mauritania's National Assembly passed a new law introducing national languages into primary education, but the text has been heavily criticised by the black Mauritanian community, which fears that Arabic will be imposed on them (Naciri Azzouz, 2024).*
- (iv) *How can science be ably taught in indigenous languages of Mauritania at Primary level? The law introduces for the first-time science education courses in mother tongues at the primary level, while requiring the teaching of Arabic to non-Arabs and at least one national language to Arab speakers, according to official documents.*
- (v) *How can Mauritania deal with teacher development and support? This is highlighted by Ben Hammou & Kesbi (2023a), Nadri & Haoucha (2020), and Ouarnik (2023), as cited by Bichoualne & Rong (2023, p. 8) who advocate for comprehensive professional development and improved instructional strategies. This includes training in criterion-based assessment methods and adopting critical pedagogical approaches which involves the development of metalinguistic skills.*
- (vi) *How can Mauritania ably deal with ambiguities in the law? In 2022, the National Education Minister Mohamed Melainine Ould Eyih told MPs, the new law aimed to "put an end to the alarming deterioration of the national education system". According to opposition MP Kadiata Malick Diallo, the new text is a "step forward in that, children begin their learning in their mother tongue." At the heart of the conflict is Article 65 of the new law. It states that "Arabic is to be taught to all children whose mother tongue is not Arabic as a language of communication and as a language of instruction." (Africa News, 2022).*

Discussion of findings

In most African countries, the official language is the language of the former colonial power (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1993). Blommaert et al. (2007) affirm that the legacy of colonial thinking shapes the LiEPs in Africa. In many African countries, this has created a language-based system of social stratification that favours a small, educated African elite estimated at 5%-20% (Kamwangamalu, 2001) and limits economic betterment for the majority of the African population. There are no significant differences in language debates across multilingual African countries; francophone, anglophone, and Arabic-speaking countries have almost identical debates, with education conducted in both colonial and indigenous languages. Considering the discussion above, six features dominate LiEP debates in Africa today.

- (i) All the policies consider the colonial languages. Despite the foreignness feeling expressed about colonial languages and the fact that Africans are not native speakers of those languages, already, those foreign languages are entrenched and developed in Africa. There are many youths and children in Africa who are monolinguals of those foreign languages. However, there is no country or region in Africa that is completely monolingual. An African child who is a monolingual of a colonial or foreign language, will eventually be isolated or a misfit for not being part of the sociolinguistic profiles of that language.
- (ii) Parents in Africa have generally expressed negative attitudes towards the teaching of their children in and from mother tongues. This kind of attitude cuts across levels from elementary to higher education. This is mainly an ideological presentation. African indigenous languages are much needed, mainly due to forces of identity. Many of these



- languages are widely used (though less in education) in their respective countries, as the findings above attest. The way the parents argue is influenced by colonial language ideologies and a sign of colonial and post-colonial influence on Africa.
- (iii) In addition to colonial languages, other foreign languages, such as Chinese, have gained importance in Africa. This is especially evident in scholarship offers, employment, and trade between countries. We want to believe that colonialism is still going on in Africa, hidden in offers and grants, without forgetting the need for the development of communication in business with those African countries which have resources. As mentioned earlier, language is a resource and a tool for interconnectivity across communities and nations; however, education planners need to protect and preserve African languages and avoid promoting foreign languages at the expense of African ones.
 - (iv) Generally, the status of sign language is not clearly defined in current education policy debates in Africa. This means that African children who are deaf or have hearing difficulties are left out. Their cognitive development, language acquisition, communication skills, self-confidence, self-esteem, and overall literacy development are hampered. LiEP planners need to remember that sign language provides an alternative communication method, reduces behavioural frustrations, supports bilingual learners and fosters inclusive, attentive, and engaged classroom interactions.
 - (v) Many African leaders and policymakers view the continent's many languages as a problem rather than a resource. As evidenced by the findings above, many LiEPs in Africa perceive multilingualism as a problem, thereby promoting monolingual policies that are believed to foster national unity, social cohesion, and financial sustainability. This is a sign of a lack of technical knowledge on multilingual language planning by representation on policy-making committees.
 - (vi) Considering the findings above, a proper African child needs to contend with at least three languages to flourish and comfortably survive in Africa today: his/ her mother tongue, regional integration among countries and a former colonial language of his/ her country. That is partly why LiEP debates are dominated by a dilemma: maintaining African indigenous identity, using languages for business, and using languages for globalisation.

Proposed Strategies for LiEP Debates in Africa

It is difficult to say that the challenges associated with multilingual education can be fully solved, but it is ideal to propose strategies that multilingual Africa can apply to achieve harmony in language planning, generally, and in educating an African child. It is high time African leaders realised that issues of education need to be addressed as a whole, rather than dealt with individually by individual countries. The proposed strategies are:

- (i) A change of attitude towards multilingualism is needed beyond individual countries. There is a need for a systems lens and approach to address the language issue on the African continent.
- (ii) Need for joint efforts in policy and planning of language in education in Africa, joint materials development and joint teacher education and capacity building. This will enable the languages to have teachers and materials within the African context.



- (iii) Colonial languages are of high value in Africa; they should be maintained, but not at the expense of African indigenous languages.
- (iv) It is time to draw strategies to promote African indigenous languages beyond the states. For example, efforts to promote Kiswahili need to be coordinated across Africa. The language of Africa is Kiswahili. It does not make sense for Africa to continue embracing foreign languages alongside colonial ones without considering the development of African languages.

Conclusion

According to African leaders and policymakers, a country with many languages is fraught with problems. There is not much difference between the LiEP debates of African countries with fewer languages, for example, 04 languages, and those with many languages, more than 200. The confusion, attitudes, and frustrations in policy and planning for these languages are almost identical. Incidentally, looking through the current debates, you do not see many new trends far from the past; the debates have the same common thread of colonial influence, multilingualism as a problem and the like. A language policy in education formulated in terms of a monoglot notion for a multilingual situation has been proven inappropriate (Nankindu, 2014, p. 177)

We concur with Blommaert (1999b) that the terms 'end' or 'closure' are not particularly suitable in the context of ideological debates and language politics because what we might perceive as the stupendous conclusion of a debate may instead prove to be a temporary moment of stasis that precludes future uptakes. In the case of Africa, none of the countries examined in this paper has reached a permanent conclusion on language in education policy, so there is no 'end'. This calls for consistent checks and reviews of language planning in education for Africa, since language is never static.

Acknowledgment

This paper is based on a presentation by the authors at the Multidisciplinary Approaches in Language Policy and Planning conference (LPP 2024) at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, from 27th to 30th June 2024. One of the authors attended in person. We appreciate the organisers of the conference and the Kyambogo University Office of the Vice Chancellor for the financial support that enabled us to participate. Several lessons were picked which informed our future research direction in language policy and planning.

References

- Adegbija, E. (2004). Language policy and planning in Nigeria. *Current issues in language planning*, 5(3), 181-246.
- Adou, B. (2024). Racialising Arabic: Colonial Education Policies and the Linguistic Issue in Contemporary Mauritania. *Race Politics and Colonial Legacies: France, Africa and the Middle East*, 7.
- Africa News (2022, January 23), <https://www.africanews.com/2022/07/28/mauritania-passes-controversial-bill-on-national-languages-in-primary-school/>
- African Academy of Languages (2026, January 26), <https://acalan-au.org/>
- Ahmed, S. (2025). Comparative Analysis of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Islamic Educational Practices and Transmission: The Traditional Mahdarah in Mauritania. *International Journal of Educational Development in Africa*, 19.
- Ajayi, J.A., Falola, T.O., Udo, R.K., Kirk-Greene, A.H.M. (2026, January 31). Nigeria. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Nigeria>



- Alvesson, M., & Deetz, S. (2020). Doing critical research.
- Bagamboula, E. Emergence of new language practices in Africa: The case of the Republic of the Congo. *Language of education and development in Africa: prospects for decolonisation and empowerment*, 157.
- Bamgbose, A. (2005). Mother-tongue education. Lessons from the Yoruba experience. In B. Brock-Utne & R. K. Hopson (Ed.), *Languages of instruction for African emancipation: focus on postcolonial contexts and considerations*. Cape Town: CASAS, Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota.
- Bichoualne, A., & Rong, Y. (2023). Language of Instruction in the Educational Systems: A Scoping Review of Empirical Studies in the Maghreb Region. *Studies in the Maghreb Region. North American Academic Research*, 7(4), 34-51.
- Blench, R. (2012). *An atlas of Nigerian languages*. Oxford: Kay Williamson Educational Foundation.
- Blommaert, J. (1999b). The debate is open. *Language ideological debates*, 1-38.
- Blommaert, J. (2007). Linguistic diversity: Africa. *Handbook of language and communication: Diversity and change*, 9, 123-149.
- Broken Chalk (2026, January 23) <https://brokenchalk.org/educational-challenges-in-congo>
- Cordell, D.D. (2026, January 23). Republic of the Congo. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Republic-of-the-Congo>
- Deschamps, H.J., Toupet, C.H., Gerteiny, A.G., Stewart, C.C. (2025, December 27). Mauritania. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mauritania>
- Ethnologue (2026, January 26), <https://www.ethnologue.com/>
- Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and Power*. Longman
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical Discourse Analysis. The Critical Study of Language*. Longman.
- Fairclough, N. (2010). *Critical Discourse Analysis: The critical study of language*. Pearson Education Limited.
- Gerteiny, A.G., Deschamps, H.J., Toupet, C.H., Stewart, C.C. (2025, December 27). Mauritania. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mauritania>
- Kamwangamalu, M. N. (2001). When 2+9=1: English and the politics of language planning in a Multilingual society, South Africa. In C. Mair (Ed.), *The Politics of English as a World Language: New Horizons in Postcolonial Cultural Studies*, (pp 235-246). Rodopi: The Netherlands
- Kovacs, A. & Wodak, R. (2003). NATO, neutrality and national identity: The case of Austria and Hungary. Vienna: Bohlau.
- Lamke, J. (1995). *Textual Politics: Discourse and Social dynamics*. Taylor and Francis.
- Lodhi, A. Y. (1993). The language situation in Africa today. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 2(1), 11-11.
- Maho, J. F. (2004). How many languages are there in Africa, really? *Trends in Linguistics Studies and Monographs*, 156, 279-296.
- Mazrui, M. & Mazrui, A. (1993). Dominant Languages in a Plural Society: English and Kiswahili in Post-Colonial East Africa. *International Political Science Review*, 14 (3), 275-292. <https://doi.org/10.1177/019251219301400305>
- McLaughlin, F. (2009). Introduction to the languages of urban Africa. In F. McLaughlin (Ed.), *The Languages of urban Africa*, (pp 1-18). Continuum International Publishing Group: New York.
- Naciri Azzouz, A. (2024). A brief overview of national languages in Mauritania.
- Nankindu, P. (2014). Language in education policy and literacy acquisition in multilingual Uganda: a case study of the urban district of Kampala.
- Obiakor, T. E. (2024). Language of instruction policy in Nigeria: Assessing implementation and literacy achievement in a multilingual environment. *International Journal of Educational*



-
- Development*, 109, 103108.
- Okebukola, P. A., Owolabi, O., & Okebukola, F. O. (2013). Mother tongue as default language of instruction in lower primary science classes: Tension between policy prescription and practice in Nigeria. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 50(1), 62-81.
- Okwudilichukwu Ugwu, E. (2020). Language policy and planning in Nigeria: Moving beyond rhetoric. *Language Problems and Language Planning*, 44(1), 1-19.
- Statista. (2024). Population in Africa by languages spoken 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1280625/number-of-living-languages-in-africa-by-country/>
- Taine-Cheikh, C. (2023). 14 Mauritania. *Manual of Romance Languages in Africa*, 32, 289.
- Tsoumou, J. M. (2024). Language Policy in Congo-Brazzaville. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Language Policies in Africa* (pp. 179-194). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- University World News (2026, January 23) <https://www.universityworldnews.com>.
- Wodak, R. (2002). Aspects of critical discourse analysis. *Zeitschrift für angewandte Linguistik*, 36(10), 5-31.
- Wodak, R. (2006). *Linguistic Analysis in Language Policies*. In T. Ricento (Ed.), *An Introduction to Language Policy: Theory and Method* (pp 170-193). Blackwell Publishing Ltd. UK.
- Wodak, R., de Cillia, R., Reisgl, M. & Liebhart, K. (1999). The discursive construction of national identity. Edinburgh University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-010-9161-8>