

REPOSITIONING THE TEACHING OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN A DIGITAL ERA: BENUE STATE, NIGERIA IN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The teaching of indigenous languages in Nigeria has faced persistent challenges, including dwindling interest among younger generations, inadequate instructional materials, and limited integration of modern technology into language pedagogy. This paper examines the repositioning of indigenous language teaching in the digital era, with particular reference to Benue State, Nigeria. Drawing on a descriptive and analytical approach, the study highlights how digital tools such as mobile applications, e-learning platforms, podcasts, and social media can revitalize interest in Tiv, Idoma, and other local languages in the state. It argues that the integration of digital technologies into classroom and community-based learning creates flexible, engaging, and interactive opportunities for language acquisition, thereby addressing issues of accessibility and learner motivation. Furthermore, the paper underscores the importance of policy support, teacher capacity building, and the development of culturally relevant digital resources to sustain this pedagogical shift. By repositioning indigenous language education within the digital landscape, Benue State can serve as a model for broader national efforts to preserve and promote Nigeria's linguistic heritage. The study concludes that embracing digital pedagogy is not merely an option but a necessity for safeguarding indigenous languages for future generations. Recommendations include among other things: improved policy implementation and funding, teacher training and capacity building, community and parental involvement and partnerships and collaboration.

Keywords: Indigenous languages, digital pedagogy, language preservation, Benue State, Nigeria, e-learning, linguistic heritage

Introduction

Language is a vital carrier of cultural identity, social values, and collective memory, yet many indigenous languages in Nigeria are increasingly endangered due to globalization, urbanization, and the dominance of English in education and communication. Benue State, a linguistically diverse region with indigenous languages such as Tiv, Idoma, Etulo and Igede, faces the challenge of diminishing intergenerational transmission as younger populations gravitate towards English and other dominant languages. Scholars have noted that without deliberate and innovative interventions, many Nigerian indigenous languages risk extinction within a few generations (Blench, 2020; Emenanjo, 2020). The decline is further exacerbated by limited instructional materials, inadequate teacher training, and negative attitudes towards the value of indigenous languages in formal education (Ogunmodimu & Akinlabi, 2021). This context underscores the urgency of rethinking pedagogical approaches to sustain and promote indigenous language learning in Benue State.

The digital era offers new opportunities for reversing this decline. With the proliferation of mobile technology, social media, and e-learning platforms, indigenous languages can be repositioned as vibrant, living tools of education and cultural

continuity. Digital pedagogy has been successfully deployed in other multilingual contexts to revitalize threatened languages, creating engaging, learner-centered environments that appeal to younger generations (Thorne et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2022). In Benue State, integrating digital resources such as mobile apps, online dictionaries, podcasts, and virtual classrooms into indigenous language teaching could transform the educational landscape while safeguarding cultural heritage. Therefore, this paper seeks to explore strategies for repositioning the teaching of indigenous languages in Benue State within the context of the digital age, emphasizing both the opportunities and challenges that digital tools present.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts the **Sociocultural Theory** and the **Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework**. Sociocultural Theory, as advanced by Vygotsky (1978), emphasizes that learning is socially mediated, and occurs through interaction within cultural contexts. In the case of indigenous language teaching in Benue State, this theory highlights the importance of community involvement, cultural identity, and learner interaction in digital environments. Complementing this is the TPACK framework, which argues that effective teaching in the digital era requires the integration of content knowledge, pedagogical skills, and technological competence (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). By applying these frameworks, the study underscores that the repositioning of indigenous language teaching must not only focus on technology use but also ensure that pedagogy and cultural content are meaningfully intertwined. Together, these perspectives provide a robust theoretical lens for analyzing how digital tools can both preserve linguistic heritage and enhance teaching practices in Benue State.

Literature review

Contemporary global policy frameworks underscore the urgency of revitalizing and digitally including indigenous languages. The United Nations' International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032) foregrounds coordinated action to preserve, revitalize and promote indigenous tongues, and it specifically encourages the use of digital technologies and inclusive policies to achieve these aims. This decade provides both a normative mandate and programmatic impetus for national- and state-level interventions in places like Benue State (UNESCO 2022)

Within the Nigerian context, scholarship highlights a longstanding tension between official language-of-instruction policies and the reality of multilingual classrooms. Recent assessments of Nigeria's language-of-instruction policy point to uneven implementation, limited resources for mother-tongue education, and a tendency for English to dominate formal schooling—factors that weaken intergenerational transmission of local languages unless reinforced by innovative pedagogy (Obiakor, 2024). Benue State's own geolinguistic surveys confirm that major local languages (Tiv, Idoma, Etulo, Igede) have written materials and orthographies but face gaps in contemporary resource development and digital presence, which constrains classroom and community revitalization efforts.

A growing body of applied research demonstrates that digital tools—mobile apps, online dictionaries, podcasts, social media, and digitized corpora—can support language learning and documentation in low-resource settings. Case studies from Nigerian language programs and broader African initiatives show that targeted digital

resources increase access, appeal to younger learners, and enable scalable documentation (e.g., Igbo digital resource pilots; African Languages Lab initiatives). However, the literature also cautions that technology alone is insufficient: successful revitalization couples tools with teacher training, community ownership, and culturally relevant content design.

Pedagogical frameworks such as Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) and sociocultural approaches are frequently recommended for integrating digital media into indigenous language teaching. Nigerian studies adapting TPACK to language classrooms argue that teacher capacity in blending content knowledge with appropriate digital pedagogy is a crucial mediating factor; where teacher preparedness is low, even well-designed digital resources may fail to produce learning gains. This suggests teacher professional development and curriculum alignment are central to any repositioning strategy in Benue State.

Finally, regionally specific documentation and digitization efforts (including dictionary apps and digitized corpora for Tiv) signal promising local capacity but also reveal persistent obstacles: uneven internet access, limited funding, and concerns about data ownership and cultural control. Reviews of digital indigenous-language projects recommend community-led design, sustainable funding models, and alignment with national policy priorities (e.g., the UN/UNESCO guidance) to ensure long-term impact. These findings point to a research and practice gap in Benue State: while promising digital prototypes exist, there is limited published evidence on scaled, teacher-led deployments that combine TPACK-informed training, community co-creation, and state-level policy support. (UNESCO, 2022)

Current Challenges in Teaching Indigenous Languages in Benue State

There are a number of issues affecting the teaching of indigenous languages in Benue state. Firstly, **inadequate teacher capacity and fluency** pose a significant barrier. Many schoolteachers are not sufficiently fluent in indigenous languages such as Tiv, Idoma, or Iggede; others may be fluent conversationally but lack training in formal pedagogical methods. Some teacher education programmes do not emphasize mother-tongue instruction or indigenous language didactics, so even when teachers want to teach in these languages, they may feel unprepared. In addition, frequent transfers or staffing shortages mean that dedicated indigenous-language specialists are often unavailable, particularly in rural areas.

Secondly, there is a **scarcity of instructional materials and digital resources**. Indigenous language textbooks, storybooks, teaching aids, and media content are limited in quantity and quality or do not exist at all. Although there have been efforts such as translating science textbooks into Tiv and exploring translations into Idoma and Iggede, these remain limited and often pilot in scope. (apps, online platforms, or e-libraries) relevant to local languages are few, and many schools lack reliable access to Internet, electricity, or devices to use such resources (Obiakor, 2024)..

Thirdly, **attitudinal factors and societal perceptions** undermine indigenous language teaching. Among parents, students, and even policymakers, there is a widespread view that proficiency in English and other dominant languages leads to better educational and economic opportunities. Indigenous languages are often seen as less “useful,” which can translate into lack of motivation among learners, and reduced institutional support. For many students, speaking or learning their mother

tongue is perceived as backwards or non-prestigious relative to English. This stigma lowers usage both in and out of school.

Finally, **infrastructural and policy limitations** constrain effective implementation. Despite government interventions (e.g. infrastructure upgrades, digital library rollouts, teacher ICT training) in Benue State, many public schools still face challenges with basic facilities—classroom space, furniture, electricity, clean water, etc.—which negatively affect all teaching, including of indigenous languages. Also, although policies exist that promote indigenous language inclusion (language policy at national/state levels), enforcement, monitoring, and funding are often inconsistent. Curriculum guidelines may not clearly define how indigenous languages should be taught, at which levels, and with what resources (Obiakor, 2024).

Repositioning Strategies through Digital Pedagogy

While it is true that many challenges plague the effective teaching and learning of indigenous languages in Benue state, a number of strategies could be adopted to remedy the situation. Below are some of these strategies.

i. Integrating Mobile Applications and Online Platforms

One effective strategy for repositioning indigenous language teaching is the integration of mobile applications and online learning platforms. Apps designed for Tiv, Idoma, or Igede can include interactive dictionaries, grammar tutorials, and vocabulary games to enhance learning beyond the classroom. Online platforms such as Google Classroom, WhatsApp groups, or dedicated e-learning portals can host lesson notes, audio-visual materials, and assessments. Such tools encourage self-paced learning and extend access to rural and urban learners alike. By placing indigenous languages on the same digital platforms already familiar to students, educators bridge the gap between traditional learning and modern technology, making language study more attractive.

ii. Utilizing Podcasts, Radio, and Social Media

Podcasts, community radio programs, and social media channels provide low-cost, wide-reaching avenues for indigenous language revitalization. Local radio stations in Benue State can air educational segments in Tiv, Idoma, or Igede, targeting both students and community members. Podcasts, easily downloadable on smartphones, can cover topics like proverbs, folktales, and conversations, reinforcing cultural identity while improving comprehension. Social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube can host creative content, from storytelling competitions to short lessons, thereby popularizing indigenous languages among youth. This strategy makes language learning engaging, accessible, and culturally relevant, while also giving learners platforms to practice actively with their peers.

iii. Developing Digital Storybooks and Cultural Archives

Digital storytelling is another transformative approach to repositioning indigenous language education. Through e-storybooks, illustrated folktales, and cultural archives, learners can access authentic materials that reflect their heritage. These digital resources can be designed with embedded audio, enabling pronunciation practice, or animations to engage children. Creating open-access archives of oral histories,

traditional songs, and local proverbs in Tiv, Idoma, and Igede ensures both preservation and teaching utility. Teachers can use these resources to complement classroom lessons, while communities can access them for cultural continuity. Importantly, these archives ensure that linguistic and cultural knowledge is preserved for future generations while remaining a functional teaching tool in the digital era

iv. Teacher Training and Digital Literacy Capacity Building

The success of digital pedagogy in indigenous language teaching relies heavily on teacher readiness and competence. Many educators in Benue State need targeted training on how to incorporate digital tools into language teaching effectively. Professional development workshops can introduce them to e-learning platforms, mobile applications, and interactive media creation. Teachers should also be trained in developing culturally relevant teaching content, ensuring that technology does not merely replicate existing challenges. By equipping teachers with both digital skills and pedagogical strategies, the repositioning process becomes sustainable. Well-trained teachers will not only deliver lessons more effectively but also serve as advocates for indigenous language revitalization through digital innovations (UNESCO, 2022).

v. Policy Support and Community Engagement

Repositioning indigenous language education through digital pedagogy requires strong institutional and community backing. Government policies must prioritize indigenous languages by funding the creation of digital resources, supporting ICT infrastructure in schools, and provide incentive to teachers to use these tools. At the community level, parents and traditional leaders should be involved in validating and promoting digital initiatives, ensuring cultural authenticity and acceptance. Partnerships with universities, NGOs, and technology developers can further enhance resource development. By aligning government, educators, and community stakeholders in this effort, digital pedagogy becomes more than a technical solution; it evolves into a holistic strategy for preserving and revitalizing indigenous languages in Benue State.

Case Examples and Best Practices

In Nigeria, mobile applications have become important tools for supporting indigenous language learning. For example, the Tiv-English Dictionary app and digital resources for Igbo have provided learners with easy access to vocabulary, pronunciation, and cultural material. These tools demonstrate how mobile-based solutions can bridge gaps in formal instruction by making indigenous languages more visible and attractive to students (Nkechi et al., 2025). Such initiatives, while still small-scale, highlight the potential of digital innovations tailored to local contexts.

In South Africa, isiXhosa and isiZulu revitalization projects have used digital corpora, online dictionaries, and social media campaigns to popularize indigenous languages. Platforms such as “XhosaLang” and online archives provide resources for schools and communities. Researchers argue that the integration of ICT with community ownership has helped shift youth attitudes positively toward indigenous languages (De Schryver, 2018). These initiatives underline the importance of aligning digital tools with grassroots cultural promotion.

The Māori language revitalization efforts in New Zealand stand out as one of the most successful global models. Government-supported initiatives include online

platforms like “Kōrero Māori,” interactive YouTube lessons, and gamified apps. Keegan and Cunliffe (2014) note that the key to success lies in coupling policy, technology, and teacher training, creating a strong digital language ecology. This case illustrates how coordinated action between state and community fosters sustainable outcomes.

Similarly, in Wales, the Welsh language has been revitalized through digital learning platforms such as “SaySomethingInWelsh,” television channels, and social media campaigns. Jones (2019) highlights how these efforts normalized Welsh in digital spaces, making it accessible to both heritage speakers and learners. This example demonstrates how mainstreaming indigenous languages through media and technology can boost prestige and intergenerational transmission.

On the global stage, UNESCO’s “Hello Indigenous” initiative promotes open-access archives, digital dictionaries, and community-led platforms for endangered languages. It emphasizes collaboration among governments, tech developers, and communities to ensure long-term viability (UNESCO, 2022). For Benue State, adopting a similar framework could mean building local archives for Tiv, Idoma, and Igede while training teachers to integrate them into classrooms.

Another relevant case is the African Storybook Project, which provides digital, open-access storybooks in numerous African languages, including those in Nigeria. These storybooks are freely available online and can be adapted or translated into local languages. Tolo and Reed (2020) show that such initiatives enhance literacy and cultural pride by giving learners culturally relevant material in digital form. The project’s scalability makes it a useful model for indigenous language promotion in Benue State.

Conclusion

The teaching of indigenous languages in Benue State faces significant challenges ranging from inadequate teacher training and limited instructional resources to negative societal attitudes and infrastructural gaps. However, the digital era provides unprecedented opportunities to reposition indigenous languages as vibrant, modern, and relevant to learners. By leveraging mobile applications, e-learning platforms, podcasts, social media, and digital storybooks, indigenous languages such as Tiv, Idoma, and Igede can be revitalized and meaningfully integrated into the educational system. Case examples from within Nigeria, Africa, and beyond demonstrate that digital pedagogy is most effective when it is accompanied by strong policy support, teacher capacity-building, and active community engagement. Repositioning indigenous language education is therefore, not just a cultural necessity but also a strategic pathway for preserving Benue State’s linguistic heritage for future generations.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proffered:

Policy Implementation and Funding: The Benue State Government should strengthen policies that support indigenous language education, allocate sustainable funding for digital resources, and enforce curriculum guidelines that prioritize local languages at all educational levels.

- i. **Teacher Training and Capacity Building:** Teacher training colleges and professional development programs should emphasize digital literacy and

- indigenous language pedagogy, equipping educators with the skills to integrate technology effectively.
- ii. **Development of Digital Resources:** Stakeholders should collaborate to create mobile apps, online dictionaries, e-storybooks, and digital archives for Tiv, Idoma, Etulo, and Igede, ensuring materials are culturally authentic and learner-friendly.
 - iii. **Community and Parental Involvement:** Local communities and traditional leaders must be engaged to validate, support, and promote digital language initiatives, while parents should be encouraged to reinforce indigenous language use at home.
 - iv. **Partnerships and Collaboration:** Partnerships with higher institutions like the College of Education, Katsina-Ala, Rev. Fr. Moses Orshio Adasu University, Makurdi, and College of Education, Oju. NGOs and technology developers should be pursued to expand resource development and share best practices, ensuring sustainability and broader reach.

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