

English as a Lingua Franca in Nigerian Politics in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the function of English as a lingua franca (ELF) in shaping Nigerian political life during the twenty-first century, focusing on political communication, national integration, and democratic participation. A convergent mixed-methods design was employed, combining a structured survey of 400 registered voters, party members, civil servants, and media practitioners in Lagos State with semi-structured interviews involving 18 purposively selected key informants. Survey data were examined using descriptive statistics and Chi-square tests of association at the 0.05 significance level, while interview transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis. The results show that a large majority of respondents (78%) regard English as the primary vehicle of political communication in Nigeria, and 72% associate it with greater clarity in governance-related exchanges. A statistically significant association was found between English usage and effective political communication ($\chi^2 = 18.64, p < .05$), and proficiency in English was moderately and positively correlated with the level of political participation reported by respondents ($r = .61, p < .05$). Although 74% of participants credited English with fostering cross-ethnic political unity, 58% simultaneously acknowledged that its dominance disadvantages citizens with limited proficiency and constrains the visibility of indigenous languages in public life. The article argues that English operates as a double-edged instrument in Nigeria's democracy: an integrative resource for governance and cross-ethnic dialogue, and, at the same time, a gatekeeping mechanism that can narrow the terms of political inclusion. It concludes by proposing a complementary, multilingual model of political communication that retains English for its unifying and administrative utility while deliberately expanding the use of major indigenous languages and Nigerian Pidgin in civic and electoral engagement.

Keywords—Lingua Franca, Nigerian Politics, Political Communication, National Integration, Democratic Participation, Language Policy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's linguistic landscape is among the most intricate in the world, comprising several hundred indigenous languages distributed across markedly different ethnic, religious, and regional communities.

Within this environment, English has assumed the position of the country's principal lingua franca, functioning as the working language of government, the courts, formal education, and mass political discourse. Its status is a direct legacy of British colonial administration, yet more than six decades after independence English continues to mediate interaction among Nigeria's culturally heterogeneous citizenry and, in doing so, continues to shape the character of political participation and national cohesion (Egbokhare, 2003; Bamgbose, 2014).

In practical political terms, English is more than a neutral channel of communication; it operates as an instrument of administrative coordination and, arguably, of political cohesion. Because no single indigenous language commands acceptance across all of Nigeria's major ethnic blocs, English supplies a comparatively even-handed medium through which political actors from different linguistic backgrounds can engage one another without one group's language being privileged over another's (Adegbite & Akindele, 2019). This integrative function is especially visible during general elections, legislative proceedings, and the dissemination of public policy, all of which depend on a shared code capable of carrying precise meaning to a linguistically diverse audience.

The reach of English in Nigerian politics has been reinforced further by digital communication. Social media platforms, now central to electoral mobilisation and public advocacy, overwhelmingly transact in English, even as they accommodate hybrid forms that blend English with Pidgin and indigenous expressions. This has encouraged the consolidation of a distinctively Nigerian variety of English, one that retains international intelligibility while absorbing local idiom and rhetorical style (Igboanusi, 2016; Jowitt, 1991). The result is a language that is at once foreign in origin and thoroughly domesticated in political use.

At the same time, the primacy of English in political life is not without cost. A recurring theme in the sociolinguistic literature is that reliance on English privileges the educated and urban segments of the population while marginalising citizens whose formal schooling in the language is limited, thereby raising questions of linguistic equity within a democracy that aspires to broad-based participation (Alabi, 2024; Essien, 1998). Nigeria's language policy has generally reinforced English alongside a small number of major indigenous languages, leaving the great majority of minority languages with little formal presence in political communication (Bamgbose, 2014). This article situates itself within that tension: it treats English simultaneously as a unifying civic resource and as a subject of legitimate critical scrutiny, and it seeks to establish, empirically, how these two dimensions play out among a sample of politically active Nigerians in Lagos State.

Notwithstanding Nigeria's linguistic pluralism, the entrenched position of English in the political domain raises unresolved questions about inclusion, accessibility, and fairness in democratic participation. English is frequently presented as an ethnically neutral medium capable of transcending regional loyalties, yet a considerable share of the population, particularly outside major urban centres, has limited command of formal English. This constrains the extent to which such citizens can follow legislative debate, interpret policy documents, or take part meaningfully in political discourse. The present study interrogates this problem empirically rather than assuming its resolution in either direction.

The main objective of this study is to examine the role of English as a lingua franca in Nigerian politics in the twenty-first century, with particular reference to political communication, national integration, and democratic participation. The specific objectives are to analyse how English functions as a medium of political communication among Nigeria's diverse ethnic and linguistic groups, evaluate the extent to which English promotes national unity and political cohesion, assess the contribution of English to citizens' participation in democratic processes such as elections, campaigns, and policy discourse, and to examine the influence of English on political engagement across digital and traditional media platforms. Based on these, the following hypotheses were tested:

H₀₁: English as a lingua franca has no significant effect on political communication in Nigeria.

H₀₂: The use of English does not significantly influence political participation in Nigeria.

H₀₃: English does not significantly promote national integration in Nigerian politics.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *The Concept of English as a Lingua Franca*

English as a lingua franca (ELF) refers, in Seidlhofer (2011) widely cited formulation, to "any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice." The field grew out of earlier models of World English associated with Kachru's concentric-circle framework, which distinguished Inner-, Outer-, and Expanding-Circle varieties of English on the basis of historical spread and function (Kachru, 1985). Jenkins (2007, 2009) extended this line of enquiry by arguing that ELF should not be judged against native-speaker norms but understood as a strategic, variable communicative resource shaped by its users. Applied to postcolonial, multilingual states such as Nigeria, ELF theory helps explain why a historically imposed language can nonetheless evolve into an indispensable, locally owned medium of public life (Mensah, 2024).

B. English and Nation-Building in Nigeria

Scholars of Nigerian sociolinguistics have long emphasised the strategic role English plays in national administration. Ibrahim (2025) contends that English bridges communicative gaps across Nigeria's ethnic and regional divides while simultaneously connecting the country to global political and economic networks, a dual function that reinforces its centrality to governance. This is consistent with earlier accounts describing English as an "exoglossic" lingua franca whose neutrality has helped contain inter-ethnic rivalry that might otherwise attach to the elevation of any single indigenous language to national status (Adegbite & Akindele, 2019; Egbokhare, 2003). Such accounts converge on the view that English functions in Nigeria not merely as a communicative tool but as an instrument for sustaining cohesion in a highly pluralistic federation.

C. Localisation and Hybridity

A second strand of literature stresses that English in Nigeria is not a static import but a continuously localised system. Studies of multilingual education and translanguaging describe how English operates alongside indigenous languages within a shared communicative ecology, with speakers moving fluidly between codes according to audience and context (Ayankojo, 2026). This hybridity has produced recognisable varieties of Nigerian English that retain international intelligibility while carrying distinctly local phonological, lexical, and rhetorical features (Igboanusi, 2016; Jowitt, 1991). Related research on Nigerian Pidgin identifies it as an increasingly influential, informally acquired alternative lingua franca, one that is highly accessible across social strata even though it remains outside the formal apparatus of governance (Omaren & Olagunju, 2025; Elugbe & Omamor, 1991).

D. Linguistic Inequality and Political Exclusion

A third and more critical body of scholarship examines the exclusionary potential of English dominance. Alabi (2024) shows that facility in a dominant lingua franca, whether English or a major regional language, can shape access to leadership positions and participation in governance, suggesting that linguistic capital operates as a form of political capital. Nwoko (2024) situates this within a longstanding ideological debate over whether English, as a colonial inheritance, should retain its privileged status or gradually cede ground to indigenous languages, while acknowledging that English continues to carry substantial economic and political advantages, particularly in urban and commercial settings. Taken together, this literature depicts English as occupying a genuinely dual position in Nigerian political life: indispensable for cross-ethnic coordination, yet capable of reproducing patterns of exclusion for citizens with limited proficiency (Bamgbose, 2014; Essien, 1998).

E. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two complementary frameworks. First, ELF theory (Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2011) provides the conceptual basis for treating Nigerian English as a functional, locally adapted system rather than a deficient approximation of a native-speaker standard. Second, the study employs a language-and-power perspective, which treats linguistic competence as a resource unevenly distributed across a population and therefore capable of structuring access to political voice (Fairclough, 1989; Alabi, 2024). Read together, these frameworks predict precisely the dual pattern the study sets out to test: that English will be broadly endorsed as a functional medium of political integration while simultaneously being identified, by a substantial minority of respondents, as a source of exclusion for the less proficient.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

The study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design, combining a descriptive quantitative survey with a qualitative interview component. The quantitative strand was used to measure patterns and associations in the use of English in political communication, while the qualitative strand supplied contextual depth on respondents' perceptions and lived experience. An inferential design underpinned the testing of the study's three hypotheses.

B. Study Area and Population

The research was conducted in Lagos State, selected for its cosmopolitan composition, high level of political activity, and linguistic diversity, all of which make it broadly representative of Nigeria's multilingual political environment. The target population comprised registered voters, political party members, civil and public servants, and media practitioners actively engaged in political processes within the state.

C. Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A sample of 400 respondents was drawn for the quantitative survey, a figure derived using the Taro Yamane formula, $n = N / [1 + N(e)^2]$, where e is the margin of error (0.05). Given the size of the target population, this formula yielded a sample of approximately 400, a size generally regarded as statistically adequate for large populations. For the qualitative component, 18 key informants, drawn from political parties, the civil service, and the media, were selected through purposive sampling for in-depth interviews. A multi-stage sampling procedure was used overall: stratified sampling divided the population into four subgroups (voters, party members, public servants, media practitioners); simple random sampling was then applied

within each stratum to reduce selection bias; and purposive sampling was reserved for identifying qualitative informants with relevant specialised knowledge.

D. Instrumentation and Data Analysis

Data were collected using structured questionnaires for the quantitative component and semi-structured interview guides for the qualitative component. Instruments were validated through expert review and pilot testing, and reliability was established using the test-retest method. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and mean scores) and inferential statistics, specifically the Chi-square test of association and simple linear regression, at the 0.05 level of significance. Qualitative data were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns across interview transcripts. Ethical safeguards included voluntary participation, informed consent, and the confidentiality and anonymity of all respondents; data were used strictly for academic purposes.

IV. RESULTS

Table 1 summarises the descriptive results for the five core survey indicators. A clear majority of respondents endorsed English as the dominant medium of political communication (78.0%) and associated it with greater clarity in governance processes (72.0%). Sizeable majorities also linked English proficiency to political participation (69.0%) and credited English with promoting unity across ethnic groups (74.0%). Notably, 58.0% of respondents simultaneously agreed that the dominance of English marginalises indigenous languages, indicating that endorsement of English's integrative function coexists, for many respondents, with an awareness of its exclusionary effects.

Table 2 reports the results of hypothesis testing. The Chi-square test indicated a statistically significant association between English usage and effective political communication ($\chi^2 = 18.64$, $df = 3$, $p < .05$), leading to rejection of H01. Simple regression analysis showed a moderate positive correlation between English proficiency and self-reported political participation ($r = .61$, $p < .05$), leading to rejection of H02. A further Chi-square test indicated a significant association between English usage and national integration outcomes ($\chi^2 = 14.27$, $df = 3$, $p < .05$), leading to rejection of H03. Across all three tests, the null hypotheses were rejected in favour of the alternative hypotheses, confirming a statistically significant relationship between English usage and each of the three outcome variables examined.

Table 1. Descriptive summary of survey responses on the role of English in political communication (n = 400).

Variable / Indicator	Response Category	Frequency (n=400)	Percentage (%)
English as dominant medium of political communication	Agree	312	78.0
English enhances clarity in governance processes	Agree	288	72.0
English proficiency influences political participation	Agree	276	69.0
English promotes unity across ethnic groups	Agree	296	74.0
English dominance marginalises indigenous languages	Agree	232	58.0

Table 2. Summary of hypothesis testing at the 0.05 level of significance.

Hypothesis	χ^2 / r value	df	p-value	Decision
H01: English usage and political communication	$\chi^2 = 18.64$	3	$p < 0.05$	Rejected
H02: English proficiency and political participation	$r = 0.61$	—	$p < 0.05$	Rejected
H03: English and national integration	$\chi^2 = 14.27$	3	$p < 0.05$	Rejected

The qualitative interviews reinforced and nuanced these quantitative patterns. Several political party officials and media practitioners described English as indispensable for reaching cross-regional audiences during campaigns, noting that it allowed messaging to be prepared once and disseminated nationally without translation delays. At the same time, a number of civil servants and community-level informants observed that town-hall meetings and constituency briefings conducted mainly in English tended to draw thinner and less vocal participation from older or less formally educated residents, who were more forthcoming when proceedings were conducted, even partially, in a shared indigenous language or Pidgin. These accounts are broadly consistent with the survey finding that most respondents view English as clarifying political communication while a substantial minority simultaneously perceive it as limiting inclusivity.

V. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings confirm that English performs a genuinely dual role in Nigerian political life, lending empirical support to the theoretical expectation set out in Section 2.5. On one hand, the statistically significant relationships between English usage and both political communication and national integration corroborate earlier claims that English functions as a comparatively neutral, cross-ethnic medium capable of sustaining coordination within a linguistically fragmented federation (Ibrahim, 2025; Adegbite & Akindele, 2019). The strength of endorsement recorded here, with roughly three-quarters of respondents affirming English's communicative and integrative value, suggests that this function is not merely an elite preference but a widely shared perception among politically active citizens across occupational categories.

On the other hand, the moderate but significant correlation between English proficiency and political participation, together with the sizeable minority who identified English as marginalising indigenous languages, lends support to the language-and-power perspective advanced by Alabi (2024) and Fairclough (1989). If capacity to participate in political life is partly conditioned by facility in English, then citizens with limited formal education in the language are, in effect, operating at a structural disadvantage relative to their more proficient counterparts, regardless of their substantive political interests or convictions. This dynamic is consistent with Nwoko's (2024) observation that English's practical advantages coexist uneasily with its status as a colonial inheritance whose dominance was never democratically negotiated.

The qualitative material adds an important operational dimension to these statistical patterns: the exclusionary effect of English is not uniform but appears concentrated in specific communicative settings, such as localised town-hall engagement, where the absence of code-switching into indigenous languages or Pidgin measurably dampens participation. This is compatible with research on Nigerian Pidgin as an accessible, informally acquired alternative lingua franca (Omaren & Olagunju, 2025), and suggests that the remedy for English-related exclusion may lie less in displacing English from national-level political communication than in deliberately supplementing it with local-language and Pidgin channels at the point of citizen contact.

These findings should be interpreted in light of the study's scope. The sample was drawn exclusively from Lagos State, a cosmopolitan and comparatively well-educated urban environment; the balance between English's integrative and exclusionary functions may differ considerably in predominantly rural or less linguistically diverse states, where a single indigenous language may already perform much of the unifying work attributed here to English. Future comparative research across multiple states, and ideally over multiple electoral cycles, would help establish how far these findings generalise.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the role of English as a lingua franca in Nigerian politics in the twenty-first century, with attention to political communication, national integration, and democratic participation. The evidence gathered from 400 survey respondents and 18 key informants in Lagos State indicates that English remains the primary medium through which political ideas, policies, and campaigns are conveyed across Nigeria's linguistically diverse population, and that its use is significantly associated with clearer communication and stronger perceptions of national unity. At the same time, the study establishes that this dominance carries a real cost: a majority-but-not-universal endorsement of English's benefits coexists with a substantial minority view that its primacy marginalises indigenous languages and constrains full participation among less proficient citizens. English, in other words, functions simultaneously as a unifying and a limiting force within Nigeria's democratic architecture, and any assessment of its role in national life must hold both observations together rather than resolving them prematurely in either direction.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Promotion of multilingual political communication. Government agencies and political parties should supplement English with major indigenous languages and Nigerian Pidgin in campaign materials, public announcements, and policy dissemination, particularly at the point of direct citizen contact, to broaden inclusivity without displacing English from national-level communication.
2. Language policy review. Policymakers should revisit Nigeria's language policy with a view to giving indigenous languages a more clearly defined and resourced role in formal political processes, while preserving the functional advantages English currently provides for cross-regional coordination.
3. Targeted civic education. Civic education programmes, especially in rural and low-literacy communities, should be delivered bilingually or multilingually so that limited English proficiency does not become a barrier to understanding electoral and policy information.
4. Investment in English-language capacity. Educational institutions and government agencies should continue to strengthen English-language instruction at the grassroots level, so that proficiency gaps narrow over time rather than hardening into a durable axis of political inequality.

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