



# Use of Multiple Languages (Mls) in Education in Sokoto Caliphate and Contemporary Lessons

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## Abstract:

This paper divulges an overview on the use of multiple languages in education in Sokoto Caliphate and contemporary lessons. The Sokoto Caliphate's use of multiple languages in education played a crucial role in its social revolution, led by Shehu Usmanu Danfodiyo. The caliphate utilized Arabic, Hausa, Fulfulde, and other local languages to disseminate Islamic knowledge, promoting education, social justice, and community development. This approach facilitated effective communication, diffusion of innovation, and localization of foreign languages, yielding valuable lessons for contemporary education in Northern Nigeria. The caliphate's emphasis on mother-tongue education, women/girl education, and personalized learning can inform strategies to address current educational challenges. By leveraging local languages, Nigeria can enhance educational outcomes, promote cultural preservation, and foster socio-economic development. The study highlights the significance of language in education, emphasizing its role in shaping consciousness, cognition, and societal progress. By embracing multilingualism, Nigeria can harness the benefits of diverse linguistic and cultural heritage, promoting inclusive and effective education.

**Keywords:** Multiple Languages, education, Sokoto Caliphate, contemporary Lessons

## Introduction

The Sokoto Caliphate, established by Shehu Usmanu Danfodiyo, was a pivotal period in Nigerian history, marked by a profound social revolution and educational transformation. Shehu Usmanu's movement, which began in the late 18th century, aimed to purify Islam and promote education, leading to the formation of the Sokoto Caliphate. This study explores the caliphate's innovative approach to education, utilizing multiple languages to disseminate knowledge and promote social change. Shehu Usmanu's inception and his social revolution were described by Bashar (2025a) in this way:

"Shehu Usmanu Danfodiyo was raised at Dagel, currently the area is in Gwadabawa Local government area, Sokoto State, Nigeria (the headquarter of old Gwadabawa Ribat). Shehu spent



about 30 years of passing the religion of Allah SWT (Suhanahu Wata'ala) to the people of Hausa states through teaching, learning, and preaching, writing. He was reported to have pen about 115 works signifying his commitment to the Da'awah of Islam. Shehu emerged in a land (state) that was covered by paganism practices, except among few inhabitants protected by Allah SWT, albeit Islam had been introduced in the region. The land is characterized with Bori-worshipping, wrongdoings, malpractices, corruption, abuses, and forms of polytheism. That is why Shehu was elicited to call the public to order, calling people to properly and strictly adhere to the teachings of Quran and Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad SAW. In this vein, Shehu applied all strategic methods of calling to purify the religion of Allah SWT. Shehu's movement engulfed the entire regions of Hausa States and after series of troubles the sates fall to the hands of Shehu and friends, ultimately leading to formation of what was regarded as Sokoto Caliphate."

The Sokoto Caliphate's approach to education offers valuable lessons for contemporary Northern Nigeria. By leveraging local languages like Hausa, Fulfulde, and Arabic, the caliphate achieved widespread education and social change. This approach can inform strategies to address current educational challenges, promote cultural preservation, and enhance learning outcomes in the region (Abba et al., 2017; Tilli, 2024). Key takeaways include the importance of mother-tongue education, women and girl education, and personalized learning. The caliphate's use of multiple languages facilitated effective communication, diffusion of innovation, and localization of foreign languages. To improve education in Northern Nigeria, policymakers can consider incorporating local languages into the curriculum, promoting women and girl education, and adopting personalized learning approaches. By learning from the Sokoto Caliphate's successes, Northern Nigeria can develop a more effective and inclusive education system. Certainly, Northern Nigeria faces significant educational challenges, particularly with language barriers. The region struggles with low literacy rates, with the North-West zone having a literacy rate of 25%, compared to the South-East zone's 90% (Ashafa, 2015; Wushishi et al., 2016). The major educational challenges are:

- Limited Access to Quality Education: Marginalized populations, girls, and rural communities have limited access to quality education.
- Insecurity: Boko Haram attacks and kidnappings have led to school closures and fear among students and teachers.
- Poverty and Socio-Economic Factors: High poverty rates force families to prioritize basic necessities over education.
- Inadequate Infrastructure and Resources: Lack of school buildings, classrooms, libraries, and learning resources hinders education.
- Teacher Quality and Training: Insufficient training, low salaries, and lack of incentives affect teacher performance (Ashafa, 2015; Wushishi et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, language barrier is enormous because English is the primary language of instruction, but many students struggle with it, leading to poor academic performance; indigenous languages like Hausa, Fulfulde, and Arabic are not adequately integrated into the education system (Ashafa, 2015). The lack of quality teaching staff, instructional resources, and curriculum materials in indigenous languages exacerbates the challenge. These challenges highlight the need for a multifaceted approach to address the educational crisis in Northern Nigeria. This paper divulges an overview on the use of multiple languages in education in Sokoto Caliphate and contemporary lessons.

**Significance of language in educational communication**

Language is a certain and complex system of communication or passing messages in human societies. The language is essential in ability of humans to learn and unlearn. Language is a system that comprises speaking, writing, exercising the hearing system, sighting, touching, and relations in order to pass message or information across human beings (Ogli, 2020). Language is connected to consciousness, interconnectedness among beings, thinking, and cognition. Language is used by humans for science, technology innovation, education, and economic development, as well as diffusion of ideas. Different languages are there across various parts of the world (Ogli, 2020). Language is utilized in speaking, listening reading, and developing skills (Pathan, 2025). Language is the tool for communication as well (Kusrheed, 2023). Communication is a process involving the release of ideas or message or information from one human (or population) on the other. It is an exchange of ideas or information among human beings. The interplay of information and relevant tools are essential in communication (Claress, 2019). A good or effective communication skill triggers appropriate response or behaviour change. For instance, the communication shall be clear, correct, complete, concise, concrete, courteous, concrete, and considerate. Therefore, the aim of multiple languages use in education in Sokoto Caliphate is to pass message effectively. Signs show that the messages were effectively delivered including the vivid ability of Sokoto Caliphate in bringing-up a social change. The multiple languages (MLUs) communication in Sokoto caliphate incorporated the 7Cs of communication as follows:

- Clear- The messages in Sokoto Caliphate educational tools are plain without ambiguity, revealing the sole objective to wake-up a behaviour change.
- Correct-The use of multiple languages (MLUs) allow the receivers to grasp the ideas and ponder effectively without mistakes or errors or distortion.
- Complete- All the relevant information can be obtained from multiple languages (MLUs) without gaps.
- Concrete-MLUs allow the receivers to comprehend without room for misinterpretation.
- Concise- Sokoto Caliphate literature messages were delivered in a summarized or laconic fashion from the bulky Islamic literatures intended for social change
- Courteous-MLUs respects the various tribes or clans by using languages they comprehended
- Considerate- MLUs consider various tribes and their language differences (Lemu, 2005; Kaura, 2009; Sheriff, & Altine, 2018; Deshmukh & Patankar, 2021).

**Sokoto Caliphate and utilization of multiple languages**

The reign in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was flanked by the emergence of its specific scholastic and academic achievement in the Hausaland and beyond as a result of social movement led by Shehu Usmanu Danfodiyo. Shehu Usmanu and his allies had written beautifully with the assumption that Islam is inseparable with education. For instance, reports had that, Shehu Usmanu Danfodiyo authored about 131 books, Abdullahi had composed 162 books, and about 75 books were attributed to Nana Asmau (Yusuf et al., 2021). However, to deliver education and knowledge to the society in Sokoto caliphate the (jihad) movement leaders understand the role of language in communicating any educational intervention. Therefore, they pay much attention to the use of multiple languages so that the messages of Allah are fully diffused into the receivers and they also read the replies as well. The major languages utilized are the Arabic, Hausa, and Fulfulde (Sheriff & Altine, 2018). Many other resident or host languages are also

utilized as vehicles for education in the Sokoto Caliphate as well. The significance of the languages is as follows:

**Arabic language-** Arabic language is the language of Quran (the Holy book of Islam). So it is the root where Islamic injunctions are derived for the running of any Islamic state, unless the state is a false one. Therefore, the Sokoto Caliphate utilizes Arabic language to compose several books that are taught in the educational system of Hausaland (Bashar, 2025b). However, the books written in Arabic language are translated or transliterated into Hausa, Fulfulde, and other local languages. One basic thing about Arabic being utilized is it harbours diffusion of innovation and transfer knowledge from the divine instruction to the local system in Hausaland (Lemu, 2005; Kaura, 2009). In this vein, Sharu and Bodinga (2025) elucidate the nature of educational advocacy in Hausaland in the course of Sokoto Caliphate:

“Sokoto Caliphate was blessed by various teachers that contributed to educational development of the area. Many of the teachers in the Caliphate are drawn from different background, albeit some of them are Fulani by tribe. Therein, the teachers in Sokoto Caliphate obtained diverse specializations from different sciences of Islam and worldly sciences (arts, humanities, sociology, technology, sciences and quasi). There are teachers that are rich in many sciences, but some are more inclined to certain sciences, therefore, students are expected to move from one teacher to the other in order to obtain diverse disciplines. The teachers in Sokoto Caliphate dissipate knowledge or education by using three major methods, namely, writing (of books, manuscripts, and other educational documents), teaching or instruction in their houses (rooms meant for lectures and teaching at home), and schools or mosques, and preaching.”

**Hausa language-** This is a home-base language in the Hausaland that is spoken or understood by many or majority of the natives, non-Hausa tribe, and neighbours (Ummaru, 1999; Wushishi et al., 2016). A lot of educational messages are communicated to the receivers (learners) using Hausa language. Hausa is utilized to translate and localize several sciences drawn from Islam (or Arabic) language with a view to cover widely and excite behaviour change. Revealing educational information in Sokoto Caliphate through the application of Hausa language makes it encourage effective communication that spurs behaviours change (Sani, 2024). Because of the use of effective communication strategies that must include the major widely spoken language (Hausa) Shehu enormously achieved his goal, as described by Shuni & Dagimun (2022):

“The life of Shaykh Uthman bn Foduye can be classified into three different phases. Namely: pre-Jihad, during Jihad and the post Jihad. In the first phase, he was mainly concerned with the teachings, preaching and writings which he started in 1774CE. Thus; before embarking on this, he was fully equipped with the knowledge of various branches of Islamic sciences. Based on his wisdom, he started the first phase of his career educating the masses in Gobir, Kebbi and Zamfara kingdoms and later he turned to the unjust rulers and venal scholars. Consequently, he successfully won the hearts of many people. In Gobir kingdom, the Shaykh faced some confrontations from the rulers. His relation with the Sultan of Gobir Bawa, in the beginning was friendly.”

**Fulfulde-** Fulfulde is a language spoken mostly by Fulani and neighbours in Hausaland and beyond. Some of the Sokoto Caliphate scholars are conversant with Fulfulde therefore translates or transmogrified Hausa or Arabic for wider coverage and to serve the Fulani tribe and Hausa people who are in the bushes or in the course of herding. The rural people needs more education to be saved from being strayed (Bobbyi, 2014).

**Advantageous lessons for contemporary education in Northern Nigeria**

Sokoto caliphate utilizes multiple languages in its calling (Bala, 2015). It is important to aver that categorically the government recognized system of education in the Northern Nigeria is taught or delivered in foreign language (English). Therefore, there are some concerns, because many of the students may not be conversant with English and its consequently manifest in academic performance, absenteeism, and development of science and technology teaching or the entire education is deranged. Uses of multiple languages that are local to the residents provide a viable platform for circumventing many educational problems facing the region (Bala, 2015). The followings are basic advantages of multiple languages use (MLUs) and adoption in the present-day educational system in Northern Nigeria:

**Children and early childhood education-** according to the yearning and belief of Sokoto Caliphate learning begins immediately after birth and halts after death (Lemu, 2005). Therefore, a father is mandated to carefully select a suitable mother to his kids. Most of the famous scholars in the context of Sokoto Caliphate were reportedly taught by their fathers, mothers at tender age or early years before being enrolled into external educational system of learning. In this vein, the application of mother tongue (such as Hausa or Fulfulde) beclouded with recurrent use of Arabic was the order. This is a great lesson for the current time. It is important to call on the system to allow or facilitate the use of local mother language to teach children before going to upper level of education (Ashafa, 2015; Claress, 2019).

**Women/ girl education-** Before the advent of Sokoto Caliphate women education is relegated (Bala, 2015). However, Sokoto Caliphate believes that education is compulsory for all that is why Shehu Danfodiyo in his writings clearly lambasted whosoever relegated women without human right or educational right. In this vein, the current system could play an important role in educating the women or girls by copying from the Sokoto Caliphate system. The use of Multiple local languages (MLLs) to advocate for women/ girls right was championed by Shehu Danfodiyo, and the use of women agents (Yantaru) was specifically practiced by Nana Asmau (Shehu's daughter). Yantaru system involved an intervention of teaching women who will be sent to homes (in far and near) to teach their folks. These inventions led by Islamic state (Sokoto Caliphate) empower women (girls) and sired successful folks in areas of education, business, and relevant life endeavours (Bashar, 2019). Sokoto Caliphate through its policies such as literatures enjoined women to be helpful in teaching the children and in turn guarding the society against devilish acts and ideas. Women in the Sokoto Caliphate helped largely in preparing families and educating the children and in economic practices (Bashar, 2019).

**Diffusion of innovation-** Teaching of educational messages by translating them into local languages (Hausa, Arabic, and Fulfulde) for instance was common in Sokoto Caliphate (Ali & Manga, 2023). This allows the easy medium to convey Islamic sciences in the locals in a way they easily comprehend. Therefore, teaching in the present day education by translating or explaining English messages (curriculum) in Hausa or Fulfulde or Arabic or Zabarma or relations will lead to a lot of improvement (Sayudi & Boyd, 1974). It will allow the transfer of science and technical messages into local dialects and encourage locals to metabolize it (Lemu, 2005).

**Localization of foreign languages-** The role of Muslims in science and technology has been historic. Muslims are the founders of large bedrock of many areas of science before modern sciences emerged (by transfer of knowledge from Muslims to Latin, Greek, and English). Muslims made the history of developing the oldest universities in the human advancement



(Lemu, 2005). Surely there are words and culture differences between languages likely in a little way. The Sokoto caliphate educational system ensures that many Arabic language ideas were modified in a way that they are easily understood by the locals. Many Arabic words or terms were modified to give Hausa or Fulfude interpretations. For instance, there was development of Tsangaya system of education, Zaire education, and home-based education (Bashar, 2025b). This invariably helps in diffusing education across the board. The present day education in the Northern Nigeria could really tap very well lessons from thus.

Personalized learning- The use of multiple languages such as Hausa, Fulfude, and Arabic by the Sokoto Caliphate educational system allows ease of personalized learning. The locals have the ability to choose any local language they can apply for learning. Thus this encourages cognitive development, behaviour change, diffusion of innovation and further development (Ashafa, 2015; Abba et al., 2017).

### Conclusion

The Sokoto Caliphate's use of multiple languages in education offers valuable lessons for contemporary Nigeria. By leveraging local languages like Hausa, Fulfude, and Arabic, the caliphate achieved widespread education and social change. This approach can inform strategies to address current educational challenges, promote cultural preservation, and enhance learning outcomes in northern Nigeria.

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