



The Importance of Incorporating Native Languages to Address Educational Challenges in Sokoto: Lessons from the Sokoto Caliphate

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Abstract: This study examines the role of communication in the educational and social development of the Sokoto Caliphate and applications in nowadays to reduce challenges in education sector in Sokoto. It highlights how effective communication strategies, including the use of indigenous languages and community-based approaches, facilitated the dissemination of knowledge and societal reforms. The research underscores the significance of culturally relevant communication methods in overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers, thereby promoting literacy, Islamic education, and social cohesion. By analyzing historical practices, this paper offers valuable insights into the enduring importance of tailored communication strategies in fostering educational progress and societal transformation within diverse communities.

Keywords: Sokoto Caliphate, communication strategies, Islamic education, cultural integration, indigenous languages, social reform, knowledge dissemination, community engagement, educational development

1. Introduction

Communication has always played a vital role in the dissemination of knowledge and societal development. In the context of the Sokoto Caliphate, effective communication was essential for the promotion of Islamic education, cultural integration, and social reform. The methods and

strategies employed by scholars and educators to overcome linguistic, cultural, and geographical barriers significantly contributed to the spread of literacy, scientific knowledge, and Islamic teachings (Dagimun, 2018; Adam, 2023; Bashar, 2024; Bashar, 2025). This study explores the importance of communication in the educational practices of the Sokoto Caliphate, highlighting how innovative approaches and the use of indigenous languages facilitated community engagement and societal transformation. Understanding these historical communication strategies provides valuable insights into contemporary educational challenges and the importance of culturally relevant communication in fostering social cohesion and development (Aturamu, n.d.; Claress, 2019).

However, the education sector in Sokoto State faces numerous challenges that hinder its development. One major issue is the inadequate infrastructure, with many schools lacking sufficient classrooms, furniture, and learning materials, which affects effective teaching and learning. Enrollment and completion rates remain low, particularly among girls, due to socio-cultural beliefs and economic hardships that lead to high dropout rates. The shortage of qualified teachers and the lack of proper training further compromise the quality of education provided to students. Cultural and religious barriers sometimes conflict with formal education, discouraging participation, especially among girls and marginalized groups. Language differences among diverse local communities can create communication challenges within schools, impacting comprehension and learning. Economic constraints are also significant, as poverty forces many children to engage in income-generating activities, limiting their school attendance. Insufficient funding from government and non-governmental sources restricts the ability to develop and maintain educational facilities and programs. Security concerns in certain areas occasionally disrupt school activities and pose risks to both students and teachers. Additionally, the curriculum may not always be relevant or up-to-date, which can reduce student engagement and learning outcomes. Access to quality education in rural and remote areas remains a significant challenge due to poor infrastructure and transportation difficulties, further widening the educational gap within the state. The objective of this paper was to examine the role of communication in the educational and social development of the Sokoto Caliphate and applications in nowadays to reduce challenges in education sector in Sokoto.

2. Literature Review

Communication is a major aspect of learning or education anywhere in the world and at any time. It is only through communication people or experts or teachers are able to pass ideas and components of the curriculum to their learners so that behavior change can be facilitated (Apuke, 2018; Claress, 2019). Communication basically has the followings aspects:

- Source- A source in any communication is the origin of the communication. It entails the person who initiates the communication, the person ready to share ideas, thoughts or information to other (s) (Marume, 2016).
- Encoding- Encoding refers to the actual process whereby ideas to be passed are translated in form of format of expression to be delivered to the receivers. As per as Sokoto Caliphate and its interaction the activities of calling people towards reformation and revolution is encoded using the local languages such as Hausa, Fulfulde, Zabarma, Tuareg, etc. These languages are unique for being local and fully understood by the receivers of information therefore are harnessed and utilized through writing of books,

singing of poems, and various forms of expression such as demonstration (Dan Fuduye, 1998; Bello, 2018; Ogli, 2020; Bunza & Karim, 2021).

- **Message-** The message refers to the actual product emanating from the source (sender), then it is the information or ideas being delivered. The message is usually delivered by the source. The major message delivered by authors in Sokoto Caliphate using local language is ideas on the ways to transform the society and bring about development. The messages had actually brought behaviors changes that are innumerable, including the development ribat systems, development of towns and metropolitan districts, human rights advocacy (calling for women and children's right) (Farid, 2005; Lemu, 2005; Gokaru & hamid, 2019).
- **Receiver-** The receiver in the process of communication is the person or people to whom the message is delivered. Their ability to understand the language of the information will harness the decoding and proper response. Failure of the receiver to comprehend the information will lead to failure of communication (Egerau, 2025; Kursheed, 2023).
- **Noise-** Refers to the factors that can come from any given point or source and consequently hindering or impeding the fidelity of the message (Marume, 2016; Bashar, 2026b).

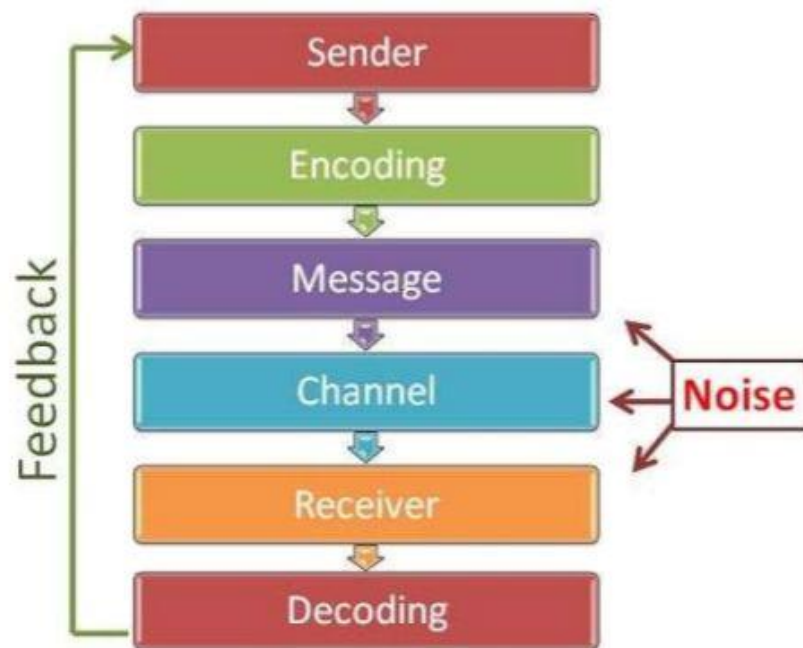


Figure 1: Components in a communication process; Source: Deshmukh & Patankar (2021).

3. Forms of noise in the absolute use of foreign language in teaching and learning

Noise in communication in education is anything that impedes the rightful delivery of subject matter. In the lane of communication process that begins from the sender to the receiver, at any point noise can emanate and causes problems (Marume, 2016). In the cause of applying foreign language in teaching and learning, the following challenges (noises) may arise:

- Language barrier- Children born and trained initially by their families are usually inducted into the native (local) or mother tongue. Therefore, tend to master native or mother language than more than any other language. In turn teaching them in other language (such as English) absolutely (unalloyed) after being enrolled at schools would make it difficult to understand some aspects or concepts of learning (Marume, 2016). Verily, words and sentences or diagrams encountered by local children and youngsters at schools are from English, and other sources of western education. However, encountering irregular words is an issue as illustrated by Shaikh (2012).
- Culture barriers- Since the system of education being taught at schools is an adopted or imported one, there is tendency that the children or young ones raised in native languages (such as Hausa, Fulfulde, Zabarma) and cultures would find some words or concepts alien to their understanding or culture and in turn leading to poor or ineffective delivery of subject matter (Bobbyi, 2014).

4. Advantages of native languages as applied in the Sokoto Caliphate and lessons for today

According to Ibrahim (2023) native or indigenous language is a kind of local language spoken by the people of the region. The native languages are medium of communication being used by people for over a very long period of time. Native language sometimes refers to as the mother tongue, which is usually the language of the immediate environment where children are raised (Wushishi et al., 2016; Ibrahim, 2023).

Aturamu (2023) hinted that, the relationship between indigenous language and unifying or integrating societies is vital. Language is essential to quality education and national development. Verily, education is a form of communication whereby information is passed and understood from one person to the other. It is indeed an exchange of ideas, texts, and emotions, opinions, between two or many persons. It is a process that involved sum of all things a person does with a view to establish an understanding in the mind of other(s) (Kebbe et al., 2025). It is a systematic, as well as continuous process of speaking or telling, listening, and comprehending (Marume, 2016). Sameera & Latha (2012) hinted that, students learning using foreign language are facing challenges that are critical to learning outcomes. Students learn much better in native language than in any foreign language. Aturamu (n.d.) in an appraisal disclosed that, the use of native language is crucial for boosting economic development and national societal transformation in Nigeria. OECD (2022) avers that, the inclusion of indigenous languages in learning positively impact on students learning, wellbeing, and encourages community participation and engagement.

4.1 Curriculum adaptation

Before the Sokoto jihad and reformation, the situation at hand was bad. That was what spurred the rise of educators such as Shehu Danfodiyo. The bad polity was indicated by Gurori & Garba (2026);

“Before the Sokoto Jihad of the early nineteenth century, many societies in Hausaland were experiencing a moral and religious decline. Islam existed, but its teachings were often overshadowed by entrenched cultural practices. Women were among the most

affected: many were denied inheritance, excluded from religious learning, and subjected to forced marriages and harsh domestic treatment. These conditions were not always recognized as injustice because they had become normalized over generations. Shaykh Usmanu Binfodiyo, through close interaction with ordinary people, witnessed how women suffered silently under customs that contradicted Islamic ethics. This social reality laid the foundation for a reform movement that sought to restore justice, compassion, and genuine Islamic values, particularly for those most vulnerable”

Nevertheless, one of the features of Sokoto Caliphate or Shehu is the adaptation of the curriculum by utilizing native languages to teach. Instead of capitalizing all aspects in Arabic literatures, the Sokoto leaders adopted them. The native languages utilized include the Hausa, Fulfulde, Zabarma, Tuareg, among others (Kebbe et al., 2025). Albeit, Islam is sacrosanct, and the books (literatures) serving as curriculum in teaching and learning are unchanged, but the principal messages are subjected to adaptation based on the prevailing state of the environment. Shehu and others scholars in Sokoto had very effective understating of the state of the nations (Hausaland and others) therefore derived lessons from the reference Islamic literatures (such as Quran, Hadith, and others) and bring-up locally-based and relevant literatures in the way that is simple, comprehensive, and amenable to the challenges facing the region (Kaura, 2009). Sayudi & Boyd (1974) indicated that, Shehu had written his own books according to the problems in the land and he utilized them to teach the public.

4.2 Educational extension workers

In the various assessment of Hausaland, the challenges are myriad and had to address through educating the locals in their own normal ways including using local languages. This needed intensified teaching and produced teachers. That is why Adam (2023) reported the situation that instigated intensive teaching for the masses:

“Before the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate, Hausaland was ravaged by religious and social injustice, political tyranny and moral decadence. The religion of Islam was reduced to mere syncretism and superstition. Spirit worship, divination and sacrifices to objects had become common practices among Muslims, who had only professed the religion outwardly and never beyond their throats. Other vices committed by the Hausa rulers were illegal confiscation of people’s belongings, over taxation and misappropriation of public funds.”

In this vein, one major thing affecting language teachers nowadays is shortage of effective and skilled teachers. Likewise, other areas of education such as sciences are short of skilled teachers to man all the schools or learners (OECD, 2022). Sokoto Caliphate also emerged in an environment that has shortage of effective teachers (teaching and practicing Sunnah and as well advocating for social rehabilitation and revolution) in a polity that is facing challenges of majority of the inhabitants are illiterates, therefore imbibed a way of educational intervention known as Yantaru system. In the Yantaru, use of local languages to teach old women and young girls easily produced professional education extension workers that released into various towns

and villages (Johnston, 1967). Bunza & Abdullahi (2024) made more elucidation of the role of education extension workers deliberately found in women in Sokoto Caliphate by disclosing this:

“Finally, Shehu unprecedentedly succeeded in this crucial issue. Women in the Caliphate were emancipated and appropriately placed as equal partners in progress in the realization of the ideals upon which the Sokoto Caliphate was founded. The efforts and initiatives of Nana Asma’u (the daughter of the Shehu) under the Yantaru system is the clear testimony that fact. Nana Asma’u, and Fatima’s daughters of Shehu Usmanu as well as other daughters and wives of the Caliphal leaders served as the women wing of the Jihad movement. They established schools and initiated educational circles for women; they traveled throughout the region preaching and teaching same as men used to do with a view to educate and mobilize the women folk. That singular act and opportunity accorded to women, remained as the most unique achievement of Shehu Danfodiyo’s reform which was very rare in most parts of the Muslim World. Danfodiyo did not only create opportunities for women in juristic and spiritual spheres, but also on some administrative ethos such as military expeditions and other related issues in the governance of the society. That legacy provided unflustered atmosphere for the emergence of women scholars in most areas of the Caliphate”

The educational extension workers used local language to teach women on several aspects such as life coping skills. This had been deduced by Sarkingobir (2025) as follows:

“Life skill and development coaching- The mother serve as a coach to mothers by modeling them according to rightful life kills. The role of mother in this case may transgress to reach –out to outsiders; for instance Nana Asma’u famously established a movement (Yantaru) that delivered educational interventions or open university system to the fellow women in the 19th century Sokoto Caliphate, a system that was copied beyond this period.”

4.3 Easiest Mobile teaching

Shehu and his community of followers serve as mobile teachers, because they move from place to and capitalizing on mass gathering to teach people in local languages. This situation could only be supported by local languages. If not because of the act of utilizing of native languages in communications the mobile teachers could be prevented by Language barrier. They moved from Gobir nation to Yabo nation to Zamfara to Kebbi and vice-versa and a number of other places as well. People come also from other places such as Katsina, Kano, Daura, Zazzau, to receive messages of educational intervention for reformation of society (Bala & Mukhtar, 2025; Bashar, 2026b). To indicate the nature of the environment tried by Shehu and his community of scholars to change to the better, Bunza & Abdullahi (2024) averred:

“Shaikh Jibril bin Umar al-Aqadesi, as Abdullahi informed us, certified the two of themwith Shehu, his brother- (with Ijaza) and confirmed them as established scholars who are competent to teach

others, and also to carry the mantle of knowledge and disseminate same in all corners of the Muslim World. That was why Shehu supported by his brother Abdullah (1766-1829) and his son Sultan Muhammad Bello, (1787-1837), took it upon themselves to teach, preach and enlightened the Muslim Ummah in Hausaland, which was at a low ebb of understanding of the religion. It was as a result of the Da'awa and teaching methodology of Shehu Usmanu Danfodiyo that made the Jihad of 1804 successful and the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate in 1809 feasible. The Caliphate which left an indelible mark on the general atmosphere (political, social, economic and religious landscape) past and present of the West African sub-region”

4.4 Diffusion of innovation

One basic feature of Sokoto Caliphate major actors is that, they imported a lot of scientific and innovative ideas to the local languages so that the public can fully benefit. In this vein, they had written about geography, astronomy, psychology, medicine, home economics, pure economics, sociology, mathematics, etc (Kaura, 2009). Abadullahi (216) restated that, the three major writers in Sokoto Caliphate had written in the multidisciplinary sciences and humanities disciplines for the benefit of human kind. And on the other hand, the combination of utilization of both native and foreign language (Arabic) was well practiced in teaching and learning in the period of Sokoto Caliphate. Efforts made by Sokoto scholars led to the emergence of *Ajami* (as a system of writing in Hausa using Arabic letters) to convey messages to the public (Bobbyi, 2014; Abdullahi, 2016). This method of using local languages to educate the locals and impart behavior change was trans-generated to the present-day teachers in Northern Nigeria and yielded fruits successfully, therefore have to be tapped. Nowadays, Bunza & Abdullahi (2024) reiterated how Sheikh Gummi used same methodology in this manner:

“.....Became a popular radio star. Criticized traditional Sufi orders, local religious practices, and modernizing secularism. Translated the Quran into Hausa. Emphasis on non-Arabic Quranic interpretation helped to develop a specifically modern and Nigerian interpretation of Islam. Took a legalistic approach to Islam, opposing innovation and emphasizing the necessity of direct individual access to the Quran. Revived interest in recreating either the Sokoto caliphate or the Medina model in the lives of individuals and political communities in Nigeria. Revived the early Islamic emphasis on education of women.”

4.5 Applicable to all students by abolishing language barrier

Sokoto adopted the use of native languages therefore; everyone is carried along in learning irrespective of background. That is why educational interventions are delivered in mass gatherings such as markets, mosques, fields (Sayudi & Boyd, 1974). This is learnt from the Islamic policies of reliving inequalities by treating everyone equally. Everyone has the right to learn in his own language. Bunza & Abdullahi (2024) attested to the use of three local languages in teaching and learning in Sokoto Caliphate, a situation that could be copied for nowadays. This was disclosed as follows:

“Shaikh Usman and Shaikh Abdullahi Fodiyo wanted as a matter of strategy, to secure popular support for their revolutionary project that was principally designed, not only to purge Islam of the indecent innovations introduced into it but to fight against the then prevailing ignorance, moral depravity and the tyrannical system of government as well as exploitative economic system; Hence, the introduction of a new style of preaching in Hausaland. This new style of public sermons which took Shaikh Usman and his able aides to different parts of Hausaland... he spent twenty-nine years on the itinerant public sermons. They used three languages Hausa, Fulfulde, and Arabic in their mobile public sermons... sometimes in prose and sometimes in poetry and Shaikh Abdullahi was his most able aide on those tours. Wherever they went their central theme was one and their target was one; that is total destruction of all customs and traditions that were in conflict with the Shariah.”

Bashar (2026c) declared this on the teachings in Sokoto Caliphate:

“Shehu was among the major teachers in West Africa in the 19th century. Shehu was named as Usman, the son of Muhammad (Fodio, a famous teacher). Shehu emerged in the Black Africa (Sudan) or West Africa (including Hausaland) and was faced with very challenging issues of his time. He was against by many, violated, and attacked because of his call to the right way of Islam. Some of the favored people were destined to answer to him and attend his preaching, lectures, and classroom instructions. Shehu’s followers are the believers. Shehu had exposed the right way to Islam and warned against the wrong way (innovations and misdeeds) in Islam. Shehu taught people about the mandatory things (Far al-Ain) and guide people to the callings of Allah. He cleaned the "illiteracy" send away "innovations" and misconceptions from the religion and some people triumphed and followed him, this culminated to trooping into Islam. In the cause of this work Shehu was faced with oppositions and travails that are uncountable. Some of the guided teachers attest to his work and empowered him”

4.6 Spurring community engagement

The black land (Hausaland) is a Multilanguage entity many people speak in Hausa and other relevant languages simultaneously. Therefore, by adapting these languages in teaching and learning interactions by scholars (of the time) encourage people from all tribes to join the band. In this vein, Hausa, Fulani, Tuareg would be encouraged. We can glimpse at what Shehu did by adapting the use of Hausa, Fulani, Tuareg, and *Zabarma* and in turn encouraging people to troop to his teachings and activities. For example, Malam Abdussalam Gimbana (who is Hausa), and Malam Agali (from Azbin), Sarkin Kabi (Moyijo, who is Fulani), Sarkin Kabi Usman Masa (who is *Bakabe*), Yunfa (onetime student of Shehu, and later became Sarkin Gobir) etc were all

able to decode the messages of Shehu and his band of scholars (Sayudi & Boyd, 1974). Bashar (2026a) has said this about Usman Masa (Bakabe) on his link with Shehu:

“Usman Masa is a brother to Sarkin Kebbi Hodi, he followed the Muslims from Zamfara to the attacks at Alkalawa, aiming to open (conquer) it. After unsuccessful attempts to open Alkalawa, Usman Masa was installed as Sarkin Kebbi after defeating the Kebbi army, and the fled of Sarkin Kebbi Hodi. Later, Usman Masa joined hands with Gobir, Azbin, and Kabawa (his subjects, and relevant lands such as Yawuri, and Dandi) to launch a battle at the Muslims doorstep at Gwandu. This is the successful breakage of any alliance or Amanah with the Muslims. A fierce battle between the Muslims (at Gwandu) and the foes (Azbin, Gobir, and Kebbi) was ensured, leading to the fleeing of the foes. The Muslims followed them to a place known as Gumbai (an abode of Usman Masa). It is important to state that, Usman Masa joined the enemies (Azbin and Gobir) to fight the Muslims at the battlefield at Alwasa. However, he was cut and killed by the Muslims at a place known as Sawwa”

Equally, Johnston (1967) had expunged on Moyijo and joining the Muslim community by the local allies such as Tuareg, Bukkuyum, and Mafara. All of these developments are possible because of the use of local languages in that vein. The explanations include:

“These towns were elated by the news of the Fulani victory at Tabkin Kwatto and the Chiefs of two of the largest, Bukwium and Talata Mafara, immediately sent envoys to Shehu, as did Sarkin Burmi of Bakura. The Fulani leaders were receptive to these overtures and an alliance was formed. As a result of it, Shehu and his followers were able to leave their retreat in July 1804 and move down into the more fertile country round the confluence of the Rima and Sokoto Rivers. In doing so they had to part company with their Fulani and Tuareg allies in the far north. To set against this disadvantage, however, was the gain of being able to join forces with Muhammadu Moyijo, a Fulani who had offered his services to Shehu at the outset and who had subsequently established himself in a strong position at Yabo. There, in what are now the home districts of Sokoto, they spent the rainy season of 1804, recruiting their strength for the struggle which they knew they would have to renew as soon as the dry season came round again.”

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, effective communication has been central to the success of educational and societal development in the Sokoto Caliphate. By leveraging native languages, adapting curricula, and engaging community-based educators, scholars were able to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers, thereby promoting widespread literacy and societal reform. The innovative

methods employed, such as mobile education and the diffusion of knowledge through local languages, demonstrated the importance of culturally relevant communication in fostering understanding and societal unity. These historical strategies underscore the enduring significance of tailored communication approaches in education, offering valuable lessons for contemporary efforts to enhance learning and social cohesion in diverse communities.

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