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Language as a Gatekeeper: A Conceptual Framework for English Language Barriers and Information Access Inequality in Rural Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

English is the language of government, health services and formal education in Nigeria, and most digital content is in English, yet a significant proportion of the rural population has limited command of it. This paper argues that English proficiency acts as a gatekeeper that determines who can find, understand and use formal information, and that it further deepens the disadvantage of rural populations. Using a conceptual design based on an integrative review of literature, the paper brings together theories of the digital divide, linguistic imperialism, linguistic capital and information poverty with studies of language, information access and libraries in Nigeria. It then uses this synthesis to develop the Language Gatekeeping Framework. The framework describes how a dominant information language, uneven English proficiency and print-centred channel design act through comprehension filtering, anticipatory avoidance and reliance on intermediaries to produce comprehension gaps, information avoidance and the structural exclusion of rural citizens from formal information systems. It also identifies three forces that can soften the gate: mother-tongue mediation, trusted information intermediaries and library-based literacy support. Six propositions are set out for empirical testing, and the framework is applied to health information and digital government services. The paper concludes that infrastructure alone cannot secure information equity in a multilingual society; it requires multilingual information provision, a stronger role for libraries as language mediators, and adult programs that combine English language learning with information literacy.

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, information is a fundamental requirement for participation in economic, civic and social life. Sen (1999) describes development as the expansion of the real freedoms people enjoy, and access to information is one of the means through which those freedoms are exercised. A farmer who cannot read a seed advisory, a mother who cannot follow the dosage on a medicine leaflet and a trader who cannot complete an online registration form are each denied a freedom that others take for granted. In each case, the barrier is not a lack of information but the language in which it is delivered.

Nigeria provides a particularly revealing example of this problem. More than 500 languages are spoken in the country, yet English is the official language of government, the main medium of instruction after the early years of schooling and the dominant language of written and digital information (Adegbija, 2004; Bamgbose, 2000). Competence in English is spread unevenly. Because it is acquired mainly through schooling, it tends to be strongest among urban residents and those with more years of education, and weaker among rural adults, older citizens and those who left school early (Banjo, 1996; Bamgbose, 2000), although these are broad tendencies rather than fixed rules, and many individuals do not fit them. When information systems speak almost only English, this unequal distribution of competence becomes an unequal distribution of access.

Statement of the Problem

The debate about the digital divide has moved past the question of who owns a device or who has a connection. It now attends to skills, usage and the ability to turn access into benefit (van Dijk, 2005; Hargittai, 2002; Ragnedda, 2017). However, language is still often treated as merely another skill rather than as a structuring condition that shapes every stage of the information process. Nigeria has a long history of studies on the information needs of rural people, and these studies have consistently reported that rural people prefer information in their own languages and through oral and interpersonal channels (Aboyade, 1984; Momodu, 2002). These observations have rarely been brought together into a framework that explains how language produces information inequality and what libraries can do to address it.

The problem is becoming more pressing. The digitalisation of government, banking, health and agricultural services in Nigeria is ongoing, and each step raises the language demands placed on citizens. Mobile phone ownership is common in rural areas, but having a phone does not necessarily mean that a person can read an English message, fill in an online form or judge the trustworthiness of the information received. Without a clear account of how language shapes access, policy makers may assume that connectivity alone will close the information gap, and libraries may continue to judge their effectiveness by the size of their collections rather

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than by whether users can understand and use what is offered. The present paper addresses the absence of such an account.

Objectives of the Paper

This paper seeks to fill that void. Its central argument is that English proficiency functions as a gatekeeper in Nigerian information systems: it determines who passes from the mere existence of information to its understanding and application. The paper has three aims:

1. To combine insights from the sociology of language, digital divide research and information behaviour theory into a coherent account of language-based information exclusion.
2. To present the Language Gatekeeping Framework, setting out the antecedents, mechanisms, outcomes and moderators of this exclusion in rural Nigeria.
3. To derive testable propositions and practical implications for libraries, language education and information policy.

The paper is conceptual in nature. It does not introduce new data; it builds an argument from existing theory and evidence and offers a framework that future empirical research can test, refine or reject.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations

Four bodies of theory inform the framework. Each explains one part of the problem; together they explain why language matters at every stage of information access.

Key Concepts

Information access is used here in its full sense: not only the physical availability of an information source but the ability to locate it, understand it and apply it to a need. English language barrier refers to any gap between the English competence a source demands and the competence its intended user has. Information inequality is the systematic difference between social groups in their ability to obtain and use information that matters to their wellbeing. Gatekeeping, a term borrowed from communication studies, describes a point at which some people pass and others are stopped; the paper argues that language is such a point.

The Resources and Appropriation Theory of the Digital Divide

Van Dijk (2005, 2020) describes access to digital technology as a sequence of four kinds of access: motivational, material, skills and usage. People can fall out of the sequence at any stage, and falling out at one stage limits progress at the next. Language belongs most obviously to skills access, since reading a web page, completing a form or following a video tutorial all demand language competence. This paper extends the point: language also shapes motivational access, because people who expect not to understand a source are less inclined to seek it, and usage access, because people tend to use only the services that speak their language. Warschauer (2003) makes a similar case when he argues that meaningful access depends on human and social resources, including literacy and language, as much as on hardware.

Linguistic Imperialism and the Politics of Language Choice

Phillipson (1992) explains why English holds its position in former British colonies. The dominance of English is maintained by institutions, budgets and attitudes that keep English in the domains of power and confine indigenous languages to the home and the market. Bamgbose (2000) applies this argument to Africa and shows how language policy excludes the majority from domains such as government, law and higher education, a condition he calls exclusion by language. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) adds that the colonial language also shapes how people value their own knowledge. For information access, the implication is direct: when formal information is produced only in English, those without English are excluded by design, not by accident.

Linguistic Capital

Bourdieu (1991) treats language competence as a form of capital. The legitimate language, in Nigeria English, carries value in the markets that matter, such as schools, offices and courts, while other languages are discounted. Linguistic capital is unequally distributed because it is acquired mainly through schooling and family background. This explains why English barriers follow the lines of education, age, gender and place of residence: they track the unequal distribution of the capital that buys entry to formal information.

Information Poverty and Information Behaviour

Chatman's (1996, 1999) theory of information poverty describes people who live in a small world, rely on insiders for information and distrust or avoid sources outside it. Such people are not simply short of information; they protect themselves through secrecy, risk avoidance and a narrow sense of what information is relevant. Wilson's (1999) model of information behaviour and Dervin's (1998) sense-making approach add that information seeking is shaped by intervening variables, including personal and environmental barriers, and that people seek information to bridge gaps in understanding. Taken together, these theories suggest that an English barrier does more than slow down a search; it can lead people to give up the search altogether and to fall back on local, oral and sometimes unreliable sources.

Literature Review

The Status of English in Nigeria

English was introduced into Nigeria through colonial administration and mission education, and was retained at independence as the official language and as a bridge

between ethnic groups (Adegbija, 2004; Banjo, 1996). The National Policy on Education provides that the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community will be used in the early years of primary school and English thereafter (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). In practice, English is predominant in secondary and tertiary education, the civil service, the courts, the formal economy and the national press. A distinct Nigerian variety of English has emerged (Jowitt, 1991), but the standard written form used in official information is not easily understood by readers with limited schooling.

In very simplified terms, the result can be described as a layered linguistic order. At one end are people who are proficient in standard written English; between them are speakers of Nigerian Pidgin and informal English, who interact effectively in everyday contexts but may struggle with dense official texts; at the other end are speakers of indigenous languages with little command of written English, many of whom are rural, older and less educated (Bamgbose, 2000). This description is a heuristic rather than a map of Nigeria's linguistic reality. Most Nigerians are multilingual, individual repertoires combine several indigenous languages, Pidgin and English in varied ways, and the position of a given person differs by region, occupation and context. The simplification is useful here only to show that access to formal information tends to follow command of the written standard rather than general communicative ability.

Rural Information Needs and Channels in Nigeria

The information needs of rural people in Nigeria have been documented in library and information science research for decades. In an early experiment with rural information services, Aboyade (1984) demonstrated that libraries can succeed in reaching non-literate communities when they use oral, visual and local language channels instead of print in English. Momodu (2002) found that rural dwellers needed information on health, agriculture, employment and government, but depended mostly on friends, relatives, local leaders and radio rather than on libraries or printed sources. Mchombu (2004) argued that community development is based on sharing knowledge in forms and languages that communities are already familiar with. One consistent message runs through this work: rural people are not uninterested in information, but formal channels rarely provide it to them in a usable language and form.

This pattern has implications for the organisation of information work. Where interpersonal and oral communication are the dominant channels, the quality of the information to which people are exposed depends on the knowledge and goodwill of the person passing it on. A village meeting might communicate the date of an immunisation exercise correctly but fail to mention the conditions attached to it; a relative who reads a bank notice may communicate the main point but miss the charges. The literature thus indicates that rural information problems involve not only a lack of information but also the loss of detail and accuracy as information moves from English documents into local conversation.

The Linguistic Dimension of the Digital Divide

While mobile phones and internet connectivity have extended the reach of information in Africa, much digital content is in English or other international languages, and most government portals are in English. Paolillo (2007) describes the uneven representation of languages on the Web, and web surveys still indicate that about half of the websites whose content language can be identified are written in English (W3Techs, 2026). For an Igbo-speaking farmer with a basic mobile phone, a connection is therefore only the first step, and the content at the other end may remain beyond reach. Both Mutula (2008) and Heeks (2018) emphasise that the digital divide in sub-Saharan Africa is shaped not just by infrastructure but also by skills, content and social context, which makes language a part of the divide and not a side issue.

Language, Learning and Comprehension

There is substantial evidence from education research that language plays a role in comprehension. UNESCO (2016) estimated that about 40 per cent of the world's population does not have access to education in a language they speak or understand, and argued that learning in an unfamiliar language reduces comprehension and deepens inequality. The same is true in the community, where a health leaflet or an agricultural bulletin written in formal English is, for many rural readers, a text in a second or third language, read with effort and partial understanding. Even at university level, Nigerian students reading academic texts in English benefit from explicit teaching of metacognitive reading strategies such as planning, monitoring and repairing comprehension (Igbokwe & Nwanekezie, 2025b); rural adults with much less schooling have no such support. Learners of English elsewhere report similar difficulties with vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar, which undermine their confidence in using the language (Muradi & Amarkhil, 2024).

The type of text is also an important factor in comprehension. Instructions, forms and legal notices are dense, contain institutional jargon and presuppose familiarity with institutional procedures. They are among the most challenging texts for readers with limited English, yet they are often the texts on which important decisions depend. A reader who can follow a simple news item may still be unable to fill out a registration form or understand the terms of a loan. For this reason, indicators of overall literacy or level of education may overestimate the ability of rural adults to use the specific documents that formal information systems require.

Libraries as Mediators

International library guidance acknowledges the importance of libraries to linguistically diverse communities. The IFLA Multicultural Library Manifesto

encourages libraries to offer services and collections in the languages of their users and to promote language learning (IFLA, 2008). The IFLA UNESCO Public Library Manifesto describes public libraries as local gateways to knowledge and emphasises access for all, including those who cannot use mainstream services (IFLA & UNESCO, 2022). However, Nigerian libraries are still predominantly English and print based, and their reach into rural areas is limited. Even within universities, the use of library resources by students is uneven (Nwanekezie & Igbokwe, 2022), and the adoption of information technology in Nigerian libraries remains partial (Nwanekezie, 2022).

The potential of libraries as mediators is nonetheless significant. Libraries already have collections, trained staff and a public mandate to serve all users. Public libraries in state capitals operate branch and mobile services that could bring translated materials and reading support to rural areas, and academic libraries have connections with departments of English, linguistics and education that could provide translation and teaching expertise. What has been missing is a clear explanation of why language matters to library work and of where, in the information access process, libraries can intervene most effectively. The framework outlined in this paper is intended to provide that account.

The Gap this Paper Addresses

Existing work can be divided into three strands: sociolinguistic accounts of English dominance, information science research on rural information needs, and digital divide research on skills and usage. What is missing is an integrated account of how these strands meet, that is, how a dominant information language interacts with uneven proficiency and channel design to produce exclusion, and where libraries and educators can intervene. The framework presented in the next section is offered to meet that need.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper adopted a conceptual research design based on an integrative review of literature. This type of design is appropriate for questions that span disciplines and where the goal is to build theory rather than to measure effects. Sources were drawn from the sociology of language, digital divide research, information behaviour theory and library and information science, with emphasis on studies of Nigeria and similar postcolonial countries and on professional guidance from international library organisations. The theories reviewed were compared to determine where they agree, where they differ and what each contributes to an account of language-based exclusion. Their insights were then synthesised into antecedent conditions, mechanisms, outcomes and moderating forces, and the relationships among these were expressed as propositions that can be tested empirically.

The method follows established guidance on integrative reviews, which aim to develop new frameworks and perspectives by critically combining existing literature rather than by summarising it (Torraco, 2005). It also reflects what Jaakkola (2020) calls a theory synthesis design, in which a conceptual article brings together theories from various disciplines to explain a phenomenon that no single theory explains fully. The review was carried out in three phases. First, the central claims of each core theory about access, language and power were summarised. Second, empirical research on information needs, language use and libraries in rural Nigeria and similar settings was reviewed to determine how far those claims are supported by evidence. Third, the points of consensus were organised into the framework presented below, while the points of uncertainty were converted into propositions for future research. Because the paper is conceptual, its findings are arguments and relationships, not measured effects, and they should be evaluated by their clarity, coherence and usefulness for future empirical work.

Sources were identified purposively rather than through a systematic database search. The starting point was the foundational literature on each strand of theory (the digital divide, linguistic imperialism, linguistic capital and information behaviour), which was located through the authors' knowledge of the field and through the reference lists of key works. Nigerian and African studies were then added because they addressed rural information needs, the status of English or the role of libraries, and further sources were followed up from their citations. Three principles guided selection: relevance to the relationship between language and information access, attention to Nigeria or comparable postcolonial settings, and recognition of the work in its field. Sources were evaluated by reading each for its central claim, its evidence base and its fit with the other strands, and points of tension, such as the debate between Phillipson and Bisong on the status of English, were retained and addressed in the argument rather than resolved by omission. Because the selection was purposive, the review does not claim to be exhaustive, and studies relevant to the argument may have been missed; this is acknowledged among the limitations of the paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Language Gatekeeping Framework

The framework posits that information exclusion in rural Nigeria is caused by three antecedent conditions operating through three gatekeeping mechanisms, which lead to three related outcomes, while three moderating forces can soften the gate. These relationships are presented in Figure 1.

Antecedent Conditions

A Dominant Information language. The majority of formal information in Nigeria, whether government announcements, health leaflets, bank applications or e-government portals, is produced in standard written English. This reflects language policy and institutional

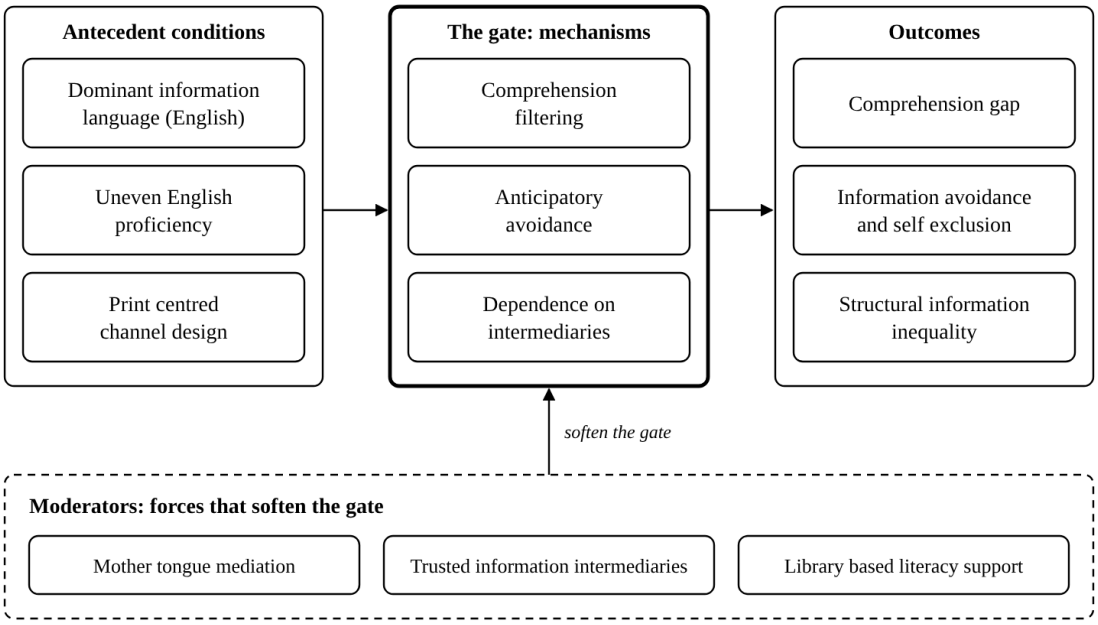


Figure 1: The Language Gatekeeping Framework. Three antecedent conditions act through the gatekeeping mechanisms to produce three outcomes; three moderating forces soften the gate. Source: the authors.

habit rather than the language profile of the audience (Bamgbose, 2000; Phillipson, 1992). The typical reader of official information is assumed to have completed secondary schooling and to be familiar with bureaucratic language. When the audience is a rural population with low levels of schooling, that assumption creates a gap between the text and its reader before any reading takes place.

Uneven English Proficiency. Competence in written English is distributed according to schooling, age, gender, occupation and place of residence. In Bourdieu's (1991) terms, the linguistic capital needed to read formal information is concentrated among people who already hold other advantages. Older adults who left school early, women whose schooling was cut short and people who have spent their working lives in farming or petty trading have had fewer opportunities to use written English, and the skills they once acquired may have weakened with disuse.

Channel Design. Information systems are built around print, text-heavy screens and formal registers. They rarely provide audio, visual, local language or mediated alternatives. Channel design thus turns a language mismatch into a hard barrier rather than a manageable one. A spoken announcement in English may be partly understood with the aid of context, gesture and repetition, and a listener may ask a question. A written form or a website provides no such support; the reader either understands it or does not.

Gatekeeping Mechanisms

Comprehension Filtering. If the language of a source is beyond the reader's ability, meaning is lost or distorted. The reader might understand the subject but miss the instruction, the deadline or the warning. The danger of this mechanism is that partial understanding can look like full understanding. A farmer who knows about a fertiliser subsidy but misunderstands the eligibility conditions, or a patient who knows that a drug must be taken daily but not that it must be taken after food, has been informed in a formal sense but cannot act on the information correctly.

Anticipatory Avoidance. People who do not expect to understand an English source tend not to look for it. Drawing on Chatman (1996), the paper treats this avoidance as a rational response to repeated failure and to the risk of embarrassment, rather than as indifference. Emotions such as uncertainty, frustration and anxiety influence whether information seekers persist, change strategy or withdraw (Kuhlthau, 2004; Igbokwe & Nwanekezie, 2025a), and a reader who repeatedly encounters texts in a language they cannot follow is likely to experience exactly these emotions.

Dependence on Informal Intermediaries. Those excluded from English sources rely on informal intermediaries such as family members, local leaders, church announcements and market talk. These intermediaries can bridge the gap, but they can also filter, simplify or distort information, and they are not available everywhere. Dependence on intermediaries also shifts power. People who can read English become gatekeepers in their own right and can decide what others learn and how it is presented. Sometimes this role is exercised generously; at other times it is used to gain advantage or to protect local interests. Because these intermediaries are untrained and unaccountable, the framework treats reliance on them as part of the exclusion mechanism rather than as a solution.

Outcomes

The mechanisms produce three related outcomes. The

first is a comprehension gap: information reaches people but is not understood well enough to act on. The second is information avoidance and self exclusion: people withdraw from formal information sources and services. The third is structural information inequality: over time, rural citizens with limited English become increasingly deprived of information about health, rights, markets and opportunities, which reinforces their economic and civic marginalisation, in line with Sen's (1999) account of capability deprivation.

These outcomes are cumulative. Each missed opportunity, whether an unclaimed benefit, an unattended clinic or an unregistered business, diminishes the resources available to a household for the next round of decisions. As the comprehension gap and the avoidance it produces become entrenched, they become part of the fabric of rural disadvantage. The outcomes may also be intergenerational: if children in families with limited access to formal information do not see written English being used for practical purposes at home, this may affect their own acquisition of the language.

Moderating Forces

The gate is not fixed. Three forces can soften it, and the second of them should be distinguished from the informal intermediaries described above. Mother-tongue mediation, such as translation, local language radio and multilingual materials, reduces the language demands of information; students in a Philippine college, for example, reported that the use of their mother tongue alongside English helped them understand concepts and gave them confidence (Vacalares & Agan, 2025). Trusted information intermediaries, such as librarians, extension workers, community health workers and teachers who are trained to explain and translate information and who are accountable to an institution, carry information to users with less distortion. What separates them from informal intermediaries is not their presence in the community but their training, accountability and obligation to pass information on accurately. Library-based literacy support, meaning adult literacy, information literacy and English language programmes delivered through libraries and community centres, increases the competence of users over time. The first two forces reduce the language demands placed on users; the third raises users' capacity to meet those demands.

The moderators work best together. Translation without trusted intermediaries can produce materials that are linguistically accessible but still unfamiliar in form, while intermediaries without translated materials must improvise explanations under pressure. Literacy programmes raise proficiency, but only slowly, and they cannot keep pace with the amount of new information that rural citizens are expected to use. The framework therefore suggests that short-term measures, such as translation and mediation, and long-term measures, such as literacy support, should be pursued together rather than treated as alternatives.

Relationships among the Elements

The framework does not require all three antecedent conditions to be present for exclusion to occur. Any one of them can create a barrier, but their effect is expected to be strongest where they coincide: a population with limited English, served only in English, through print or screen channels with no mediated alternative. Where one condition is relaxed, for example where information is broadcast orally in Igbo, the barrier is expected to weaken even if the other conditions remain.

The three mechanisms also interact. Repeated experiences of comprehension filtering are likely to feed anticipatory avoidance, because people learn to expect failure; avoidance in turn increases dependence on informal intermediaries; and reliance on intermediaries can reduce opportunities to practise reading English, which sustains low proficiency. The framework therefore describes a reinforcing cycle rather than a simple chain of cause and effect.

These relationships can be observed. Antecedent conditions can be documented through language audits of information materials and channels, and proficiency can be measured directly. Mechanisms can be observed through comprehension tasks based on real documents, reported and observed avoidance, and records of who people consult. Outcomes can be measured as the gap between information that reaches people and information they can correctly act on, and as differences in access across social groups over time.

Propositions

The framework yields six propositions that can be tested empirically:

1. **P1:** When education and age are held constant, the lower a person's proficiency in written English, the lower their comprehension of formal information presented only in English.
2. **P2:** Limited English proficiency is associated with greater avoidance of formal information sources, and this association is stronger for written and digital sources than for oral and local channels.
3. **P3:** The influence of English proficiency on information access is greatest for digital and government information and least for information provided through community and interpersonal channels.
4. **P4:** The availability of mother-tongue versions of information weakens the relationship between English proficiency and information comprehension.
5. **P5:** Access to trained information intermediaries, including librarians, weakens the relationship between limited English proficiency and information avoidance.
6. **P6:** Participation in library-based programmes that combine English language learning with information literacy increases information access among rural adults over time.

These propositions can be tested through surveys that include direct measures of proficiency, field experiments

comparing English-only and multilingual materials, and qualitative studies of how rural residents interpret and act on information. Plausible indicators include the following. Proficiency can be measured with a reading test adapted from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and built on everyday documents. Comprehension can be measured by asking respondents to perform tasks based on authentic materials, such as stating a medicine dosage or the eligibility conditions of a programme. Avoidance can be measured with self-report scales on the frequency with which English sources are set aside, supported where possible by observation of service use. Access can be measured with an index of information obtained and used across the health, agricultural, civic, economic and digital domains. Propositions P1 to P5 can be examined with cross-sectional data, but P6 predicts change over time and is best tested through longitudinal or intervention-based designs, for example by comparing participants in a library-based programme with a matched comparison group before and after the programme.

Illustrative Application of the Framework

Two domains illustrate how the framework can be used to diagnose language-based exclusion.

Health Information. Clinic posters, leaflets, medicine labels and public campaigns are the common platforms for disseminating health information in Nigeria, and most of them are in English. In a rural community, a dominant information language and print-centred channel design meet a population in which many adults have limited proficiency. Comprehension filtering appears when patients know that they must take a medicine but not the dose or the warnings. Anticipatory avoidance appears when people stop reading leaflets they do not expect to understand and rely instead on what their neighbours tell them. Dependence on intermediaries appears in the central role of patent medicine vendors, community health workers and relatives who explain instructions. The framework suggests that the quality of these intermediaries will be a critical determinant of health outcomes in such a setting, and that the gate can be softened most quickly by producing key instructions in Igbo and in pictorial form and by training health workers to explain them.

Digital Government Services. Government services in Nigeria are increasingly provided online, including portals for identity registration, social programmes, tax and business registration. These services combine all three antecedent conditions in a strong form: they are written in English, they are text-heavy, and they offer few audio or local language options. Rural users with limited English experience comprehension filtering at every screen, and many avoid such services altogether, relying instead on cybercafé operators or family members to register on their behalf. The framework suggests that, without local language interfaces and trained intermediaries, the growth of digital services is likely to widen the gap between rural and urban citizens even as connectivity increases. This prediction is in line with van Dijk's (2005) observation that inequality in skills access is carried forward into unequal usage.

In both cases, the framework can be applied as a diagnostic tool. It directs the attention of information services to three questions: in what language and form is the information produced, who among the intended users can read it easily, and what happens to those who cannot? The answers show which mechanism is predominant in a particular context and hence which moderator is likely to be most effective. A service where avoidance is the main problem may require trusted intermediaries more than translated documents, while a service where comprehension filtering predominates may benefit most from plain language and local language versions.

Contribution of the Framework to Existing Theory

The framework addresses specific explanatory gaps in existing models and proposes relationships that those models do not state.

Gap in Digital Divide Theory. Van Dijk's (2005, 2020) resources and appropriation theory treats skills as operational, informational and strategic, and places language, if at all, within skills access. It does not explain why people with physical access and some digital skills still fail to benefit from information in a multilingual setting. The framework addresses this by proposing that proficiency in the language of content is a precondition for all three kinds of skill, and further that it affects motivational access, through anticipatory avoidance, and usage access, through the choice of channels people are able to use. The claim that language operates at several stages of access, not only at the skills stage, is newly proposed here.

Gap in Information Poverty Theory. Chatman's (1996, 1999) account explains the avoidance of outside sources through secrecy, mistrust and the norms of small worlds, but it does not consider the language in which outside information arrives. The framework proposes a linguistic pathway to the same behaviour: avoidance as a learned response to repeated comprehension failure. This pathway, and the reinforcing cycle linking comprehension filtering, avoidance and dependence on intermediaries, are new relationships rather than a rearrangement of Chatman's concepts, and they predict that avoidance should fall when information is provided in a language people can read comfortably, a prediction Chatman's account does not make.

Gap Between Sociolinguistic Theory and Information practice. Phillipson (1992), Bamgbose (2000) and Bourdieu (1991) explain why command of English is unequally distributed and valued, but they do not specify where institutions such as libraries can intervene. The framework links linguistic capital to identifiable points of intervention and distinguishes trained, accountable intermediaries, which moderate exclusion, from informal intermediaries, which form part of it. The moderation hypotheses in propositions P4 to P6 are newly proposed

and are what make the framework testable as a guide to practice rather than only as a description.

The framework also qualifies these theories. It does not treat English as an imposition to be removed, and it accepts Bisong's (1995) point that Nigerians often learn English willingly and pragmatically. Its concern is narrower: institutions that communicate only in English, with a population that does not all read English well, will exclude part of that population, whatever the intentions of the institutions or the attitudes of the population.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that English proficiency acts as a gatekeeper to formal information in rural Nigeria. In the Language Gatekeeping Framework, a dominant information language, uneven proficiency and print-centred channel design work through comprehension filtering, anticipatory avoidance and dependence on intermediaries to produce comprehension gaps, self exclusion and enduring information inequality, while mother-tongue mediation, trusted intermediaries and library-based literacy support can soften the gate. The framework treats language as a structuring condition of access rather than one skill among many, and offers six testable propositions. Libraries should provide materials in Igbo, Nigerian Pidgin and other local languages, train librarians as language mediators, reach communities through oral and visual formats, and partner with English departments (Igbokwe & Nwanekezie, 2026b); adult language education should combine English with information literacy (Association of College and Research Libraries [ACRL], 2016; Igbokwe & Nwanekezie, 2026a); and government agencies should provide essential information and e-government services in local languages and fund trained intermediaries. The framework rests on theory and a purposive review rather than new data, and it focuses on Igbo-speaking South East Nigeria. Surveys with direct measures of proficiency, field trials of multilingual materials and longitudinal studies of library programmes should test it.

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