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LINGUISTIC EXCHANGE AS FOREIGN POLICY: THE BRAZIL–NIGERIA CASE

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"No one educates anyone else, nor do we educate ourselves alone; people educate one another mediated by the world."[5]

Paulo Freire, in Pedagogia do Oprimido

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"Ninguém educa ninguém, ninguém educa a si mesmo, os homens se educam entre si, mediatizados pelo mundo.", in In Pedagogy of the oppressed.

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ABSTRACT

Foreign policy has traditionally been conducted by central government bodies, but universities, research institutions and civil society increasingly contribute to a country's international engagement. This article argues that linguistic exchange should be understood as an instrument of foreign policy, using Brazil and Nigeria as a case. The two countries are the most populous in their regions and share deep historical, cultural and diaspora ties, from the Agudá returnee communities of the Bight of Benin to contemporary trade, yet language remains a barrier: Portuguese in Brazil, English in Nigeria. Many Brazilians lack affordable access to quality English instruction, while Portuguese is little known in Nigerian society. The article proposes a reciprocal Brazil–Nigeria linguistic exchange programme, connecting universities and federal institutes in both countries with the support of Brazil's Instituto Guimarães Rosa, Ministry of Education/CAPES and the International Institute of the Portuguese Language. It would offer Portuguese and English instruction at all levels, use existing digital platforms, and follow a horizontal model in which participants teach their own language in exchange for learning the partner's. The proposal is set against planned large-scale cooperation such as the Green Imperative agricultural programme, which would require linguistic infrastructure. It is illustrated by the NIDOA Brazil Language Academy in São Paulo, a community-based example of low-cost reciprocal language learning. The article concludes that linguistic exchange can strengthen public, cultural and science diplomacy, expand educational opportunity, and consolidate South–South cooperation between Brazil and Nigeria.

Keywords: Linguistic exchange; foreign policy; Brazil–Nigeria relations; South–South cooperation; cultural diplomacy; language education

Note: An earlier Portuguese version of this article appeared as "Intercâmbio linguístico como política externa: caso Brasil-Nigéria", UnB Notícias, 10 January 2026.

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Traditionally, foreign policy has been understood as the set of actions, principles, and guidelines through which a state conducts its relations with other international actors. Historically, it has been formulated and implemented by the central organs of government—particularly, in Brazil's case, by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Coherence, professionalism, and continuity are defining features of Brazilian diplomacy. In the contemporary world, however, marked by the rapid advance of information and communication technologies and, more recently, by the incorporation of Artificial Intelligence into decision-making, analytical, and communicative processes, the domain of foreign policy has expanded well beyond the institutional boundaries of Itamaraty, increasingly encompassing actors, platforms, and spheres of influence that would once have been unimaginable.

Universities, federal institutes, and research institutions have thus exercised—indeed, since the promulgation of the 1988 Brazilian Constitution—the autonomy of tertiary education institutions to contribute substantively to debate, knowledge production, and the development of foreign-policy instruments that enrich and diversify Brazil's international engagement.

It is from this perspective that linguistic exchange should be understood as an instrument of foreign policy, since it enables Brazil to deepen its international relations with countries about which knowledge remains limited, creating channels of rapprochement that extend beyond traditional diplomacy. Mutual language learning facilitates not only communication but, above all, access to the ethos of partner societies, revealing values, cultural practices, and ways of thinking that would be difficult to apprehend through institutional contacts alone.

As the Brazilian educational philosopher Paulo Freire stated, "A leitura do mundo precede a leitura da palavra" , linguistic exchange exposes citizens of both countries to one another's everyday realities, fostering concrete experiences that broaden mutual understanding and strengthen bonds of trust. In doing so, it helps prepare a new generation of actors capable of deepening future diplomatic, economic, cultural, and technical relations, thereby consolidating language as a bridge for integration and a vector of strategic cooperation across the Global South.

South–South linguistic cooperation between Brazil and Nigeria, for instance, would fit squarely within foreign-policy initiatives aimed at integrating the Global South, constituting a strategic initiative designed to move beyond traditional Brazilian models of academic and cultural exchange, which have historically been centred on the Global North. The choice of Nigeria as a priority partner, for example, rather than English-speaking countries historically associated with the international system, reflects an intention to build horizontal and mutually beneficial relations capable of strengthening the autonomy and agency of the countries involved, while simultaneously bringing together linguistic exchange, public diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy.

Nigeria, a major African economy and a cultural centre of continental significance (BOURNE, 2015), offers fertile ground for the promotion of Portuguese as a language of regional integration, while also contributing to expanded English proficiency among Brazilians. This creates a space of linguistic and academic complementarity that reinforces the logic of South–South cooperation.

Nigeria stands out as a leading candidate for priority partnership on the African continent, not only because of its economic and cultural relevance but also because it is the country with which Brazil maintains one of its longest-standing and deepest historical ties.

Also, Brazil and Nigeria are the two largest economies and populations in South America and Africa respectively, sharing deep historical, cultural, and

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diaspora links. Yet, language remains a key barrier: Portuguese in Brazil and English in Nigeria. Since the late nineteenth century, communities of Brazilian returnees—the so-called "Popo Agudas"—settled in Lagos and other parts of the Gulf of Guinea, leaving enduring marks on local social and cultural practices (GURAN, 2000).

Among the most visible legacies are the dissemination of diverse uses of cassava, which became an integral part of Nigerian cuisine, contributions to the use of maize in a variety of preparations, and the introduction of pineapple as a cultivated and widely consumed fruit. These culinary elements are accompanied by architectural influences, including colonial houses in a Luso-Brazilian style, with ornamented façades and wooden verandas, as well as social practices related to community organisation and the valuing of formal education. This historical and cultural entanglement reinforces Nigeria's centrality as a strategic partner for Brazil, since contemporary linguistic and academic cooperation forms part of a continuum of connections extending back through centuries of human and cultural exchange.

It should also be recalled that Nigeria, frequently referred to as the "Giant of Africa," exerts decisive influence across the continent through its cultural, political, and economic leadership. It is a central actor in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), as well as in African Union initiatives concerned with stability and regional integration. Economically, its large economy—serving a population of more than 230 million and supported by substantial natural resources—underpins infrastructure and trade projects that directly affect neighbouring countries, reinforcing Nigeria's position as a hub for investment and cooperation. Culturally, Nigeria projects influence through its creative industries: Nollywood, described as the world's second-largest film industry by volume of production (RAUCH, 2025), and Afrobeat, which has reached global audiences, operate as instruments of cultural diplomacy and soft power, shaping imaginaries and cultural practices across Africa and worldwide. This combination of political, economic, and cultural influence makes Nigeria a strategic partner for Brazil, capable of extending the benefits of bilateral cooperation across the African continent.

Considering Nigeria as a priority setting for the promotion of Portuguese-language education is particularly relevant in light of the potential implementation of the major industrial-development initiative known as "The Green Imperative,"[1] conceived as a strategic Brazil–Nigeria partnership to modernise African agriculture through sustainable technologies and knowledge transfer. Budgeted at approximately US$1.2 billion, the project is expected to be implemented across 736 Nigerian local government areas, requiring the mobilisation of more than 1,000 Brazilians to train approximately 10,000 farmers and around 1,000 Nigerian professionals in agricultural sciences and engineering. This operational scale—bringing together technological innovation, workforce training, and the strengthening of production chains—requires not only technical expertise but also a linguistic infrastructure capable of enabling the fluid circulation of knowledge among specialists, institutions, and communities. The promotion of Portuguese in this context expands the capacity for cooperation, facilitates integration between English- and Portuguese-speaking African countries, and positions Brazil as a central actor in building a sustainable-development agenda on the continent. Portuguese-language education in Nigeria is therefore not merely an educational instrument; it is also a strategic resource for maximising the economic, social, and environmental impacts of "The Green Imperative," while consolidating Nigeria as a priority partner in Brazil's Global South-oriented foreign policy.

Now let us look at Brazil. Brazil needs English language learning on a large scale if it is to fully integrate

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into the global economy and expand opportunities for its citizens. In today's world, English is the dominant language of international business, science, technology, higher education, and digital communication. Yet, for millions of Brazilians, access to quality English instruction remains limited and unequal.

Although English is part of the curriculum in most public schools, the outcomes are often unsatisfactory. Many schools face shortages of qualified teachers, limited classroom hours, overcrowded classes, and a lack of adequate teaching materials. As a result, students frequently complete their secondary education with only a basic understanding of the language and insufficient skills for professional or academic use.

Families that seek effective English instruction usually turn to private language schools. However, the cost of such courses represents a significant burden. Tuition fees, registration costs, textbooks, and examinations can amount to several thousand Reais per year, placing quality language education beyond the reach of many households. For low-income families, and even for a substantial portion of the middle class, sustained enrolment in private language programmes is often financially impossible.

This reality transforms English proficiency into a social barrier. Access to a skill that is increasingly essential for better employment opportunities, international scholarships, participation in global research networks, and access to knowledge becomes concentrated among those who can afford private education. Consequently, students from wealthier families enjoy a significant competitive advantage in university admissions, professional careers, and international mobility.

But what about Brazilians from lower-income backgrounds? What about the children of working-class families or even the average middle-class household struggling with rising living costs? Many possess the talent, ambition, and determination to succeed internationally, yet they are denied access to one of the most important tools of social and economic advancement. Without affordable and high-quality English instruction, countless Brazilians remain excluded from opportunities that could transform their lives.

For Brazil to become more competitive and inclusive, English language education should be treated not as a privilege, but as a strategic national priority and also a foreign policy priority. Expanding access to quality English instruction through public schools, community programs, online learning platforms, and international cooperation initiatives would help reduce inequality and equip a larger share of the population to participate in the global economy. In the twenty-first century, proficiency in English is not merely an educational advantage; it is increasingly a prerequisite for social mobility, economic competitiveness, and equal opportunity.

Therefore, an initial assessment reveals a degree of reciprocal linguistic deficiency: on the one hand, relatively low levels of English proficiency among Brazilian students and researchers; on the other, the limited dissemination of Portuguese language among Nigerian society. This linguistic gap constrains the potential for academic and scientific cooperation by hindering the circulation of ideas and the joint production of knowledge.

A linguistic exchange programme would therefore seek to address this challenge through the creation of a collaborative teaching and learning network connecting Brazilian and Nigerian institutions, coordinated by leading organisations and universities in both countries and supported by the Guimarães Rosa Institute (Instituto Guimarães Rosa—IGR), the body responsible for cultural diplomacy within Brazil's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Such a programme could promote Portuguese- and English-language education at basic, intermediate, and advanced levels, encompassing both undergraduate and postgraduate educa-

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tion.

From the Brazilian perspective, the possibility of engaging Nigerian teachers and specialists in English-language education represents a strategic opportunity to democratise access to a competence that is essential for international participation. A substantial proportion of Brazilians who need to learn English face financial barriers to private language courses, which further positions linguistic exchange as an instrument of social and educational inclusion.

In addition, the presence of Nigerian faculty members at Brazilian universities and federal institutes would not only enrich students' academic curricula but also broaden the cultural and methodological diversity of the teaching and learning process.

For this initiative to realise its full potential, however, linguistic exchange must be supported by the existing higher-education infrastructure in both countries, ensuring institutional support, academic certification, and technological integration. In this way, the project could be consolidated as a high-impact public policy capable of strengthening South–South cooperation and expanding educational and professional opportunities for thousands of Brazilians.

The initiative could be operationalised through Brazilian federal institutions, with support from the federal government, by connecting existing digital platforms for Portuguese-language teaching with Nigerian universities. The pedagogical model should privilege horizontality, enabling students and teachers to offer courses in their native language in exchange for learning the partner language, thereby avoiding the reproduction of historical hierarchies and promoting the value of each country's cultural identities. Academic certification could be provided through examinations administered by partner universities, ensuring institutional recognition and international credibility. Institutional coordination should also involve Brazil's Ministry of Education/CAPES and the International Institute of the Portuguese Language (Instituto Internacional da Língua Portuguesa— IILP), which could provide technical and methodological support for consolidating the initiative.

The strategic benefits of such cooperation are multiple and span several dimensions. In public and cultural diplomacy, they include greater international visibility for Brazilian institutions, an enhanced role for the IGR as a reference institution operating at a level comparable to counterpart organisations such as the Camões, Cervantes, and Goethe institutes, and the strengthening of Brazil's and Nigeria's images as central actors in Global South integration. Valuing Portuguese and English as instruments of rapprochement would expand cultural diplomacy and reinforce ties between the two countries. In educational and science diplomacy, the establishment of bilateral academic networks connecting Brazilian and Nigerian studies, partnership with the International Institute of the Portuguese Language (IILP), and stronger cooperation among research centres and universities would increase the density of bilateral relations in education, culture, and trade.

Knowledge production among students and faculty would likewise be strengthened through the consolidation of research networks in International Relations focused on Southern epistemologies, incentives for jointly authored articles and comparative studies, and the establishment of laboratories dedicated to the pedagogy of foreign/additional languages, with direct implications for pedagogical innovation. Academic internationalisation would gain renewed momentum through expanded virtual and in-person student mobility, potentially reaching up to 100,000 students per year. Brazilian students would be able to internationalise their education through English-language learning, while Nigerian students would broaden their opportunities by acquiring Portuguese, an official language in several African countries and an instrument of regional integration.

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The initiative can deepen the strategic partnership beyond oil and commodities, project African and Latin American leadership in South–South cooperation, and counter Western-centric narratives by building direct people-to-people ties. Portuguese-speaking Nigerian exporters can access Mercosur; English-speaking Brazilian firms can enter AfCFTA markets via Nigeria; and bilingual (English–Portuguese) diplomats will strengthen both countries' positions in the UN, WTO and climate negotiations. Brazil and Nigeria can unlock a new era of trade, diplomacy, and cultural solidarity. "Brazil–Nigeria Language and Cultural Centres" can be established in Lagos, Abuja, São Paulo, Brasília, and Salvador.

The project's efficiency and sustainability could be supported through the use of existing digital platforms and the incorporation of teaching materials by partner institutions, reducing costs and ensuring a cooperation model based on reciprocity and limited public expenditure.

The direct impact on the development of qualified human capital would strengthen local economies and expand the international engagement of both countries. The expected impact is wide-ranging: stronger cultural diplomacy; greater international visibility for Brazil and Nigeria; academic and scientific integration among institutions in the Global South; large-scale language capacity-building, with multiplier effects on trade, culture, and public diplomacy; and the consolidation of research networks and critical knowledge production concerning Brazil and Nigeria. It would therefore constitute an innovative foreign-policy initiative that brings together education, culture, science, trade, cooperation, and diplomacy in support of a more integrated, autonomous, and influential Global South.

Such an initiative would constitute an effective contribution by Brazilian academia and the education sector to the advancement of Brazilian foreign policy, particularly in a world undergoing profound transformation in the twenty-first century. Reliance exclusively on the major powers is no longer a sufficiently secure basis for international engagement; Brazil needs to diversify its foreign policy and broaden its dialogue with the rest of the world. Brazil's and Nigeria's relations with the Global South, although promising and dynamic, remain relatively incipient, since Brazil-Nigeria foreign policy has historically maintained deep and prolonged ties with developed countries, leaving the trade reduced to oil and sugar.

A practical example of a language exchange philosophy advocated in this paper is the work already being implemented by NIDOA Brazil (Nigerians in Diaspora Organisation Americas, Brazil Chapter), based in São Paulo, through its "NIDOA Brazil Language Academy". As a community-based organisation committed to strengthening educational, cultural, and social ties between Nigeria and Brazil, NIDOA has developed an innovative and low-cost language exchange model that benefits participants from both countries. Recognising that language is often the greatest barrier to integration, academic achievement, and professional mobility, the academy offers subsidised Portuguese language courses to Nigerians and members of the Nigerian diaspora while providing English language instruction to Brazilians who may not have the financial resources to access private language schools. In doing so, NIDOA creates a reciprocal learning environment where young Nigerians and Brazilians learn from and interact with one another, fostering intercultural understanding alongside language acquisition. This initiative improves communication skills and strengthens connections between diaspora communities and the Brazilian community, demonstrating how community-led language exchange programmes can promote inclusion, social cohesion, and mutually beneficial relationships between the civil society of Nigeria and Brazil.

In the changing reality in which we live, it is essential

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to mobilise all sectors of Brazilian and Nigerian societies in order to achieve a fuller understanding of the dynamics of Global South countries, enabling Brazil and Nigeria to act more assertively and successfully in the years ahead and to consolidate a plural, strategic, and sustainable international presence. Linguistic exchange offers an especially compelling avenue for expanding foreign relations.

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