

# LANGUAGE EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY OF IZON LANGUAGE

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## **Abstract**

*Language is a potent tool which identifies a people. Its importance in society for the transmission of culture and attainment of literacy cannot be overemphasized. Meaningful education is achieved through the instrument of language. It is on this note that the language policy was formulated. In the policy, while some Nigerian languages occupy prominent position which places them on the category of major languages, others are marginalized, fraught with the minority- Syndrome status. The Izon language, based on this policy, has suffered serious retardation. This paper is keyed toward examining the Izon language, its status in the language policy, and the problems confronting its growth and development. Recommendations to improve the situation are also proffered in this study.*

The concept of education is of paramount importance to the development of any nation. Without education, no doubt, the society will be marked with protuberance of illiteracy, ignorance and superstition. If this be the case, what parameter or yardstick can be used in achieving this concept imbued with the capability of transforming the individual in particular, and the society in general? The answer is not hard to reach. Language, of course, is the yardstick. If this be the case, what effort has government put in place to use language as a vehicle to achieve education? The Federal Government of Nigeria, by virtue of the National Policy on Education, stipulated that the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment be used as a medium of instruction throughout the pre-primary and the first three years of the primary education. The mother tongue is taught as a subject after the first three years of primary education and

the English language is used as a medium of instruction for the rest of the child's academic life. It also stipulated that the child learns one of Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo-Nigeria's major languages, for the purpose of fostering national unity (NPE, 2014:7). These proclamations indubitably have laden other Nigerian languages with the minority status. This policy, as a matter of concern, raises certain questions such as: How can studying the language of others contribute to national unity when yours is abandoned? To what extent has this policy succeeded? What has this caused other languages under the minority umbrella? Nigeria, being the largest economy in Africa, Twenty sixth in the world, and now, racing to be among the top 20 largest economy in the world by 2020 and beyond, should not consider growth and development in only certain sectors of the economy, but also the education sector by making effort to make some reforms in the language policy and other areas. It is on this note that this paper is channelled towards examining the status and setbacks confronting the development of Nigerian minority languages with particular reference to Izon language, using the national policy on Education.

### **Language and Education**

Language is not inherited but acquired. It is a means devised by humans to acquire and use complex systems of communication. Sapir (1949) cited in Yusuf (2012) language is a pure and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols. In this definition, two terms are worthy of isolation for further discussion. These are "human" and "non-instinctive". As Sapir rightly put it, humans are the only species that possess language, and all normal humans uniformly possess it. Since language is species-specific and species-uniform, it can be said to be the only factor which distinguishes man from other animals. Other animals, though, do communicate but their communication system is not as developed as that of man. Animals do not have the appropriate voice box for speech production (Uguru, 2009). Man is the only speaking animal. Animal communication does not go beyond a sort of response to certain stimuli to signal hunger, sexual excitement, fear, happiness and other feelings (Anagbogu, Eme and Mbah, 2010).

Similarly, language is not heredity-based, that is, it cannot be passed from a parent to a child. It is therefore perceived on this note, as being non-instinctive. Brown (1987) cited in Yusuf (2012) sees language as an institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of arbitrary used oral-auditory symbol. Going by this definition, one would say that more importance is given to the fact that language is primarily speech, produced by oral-auditory arbitrary symbols. A speaker articulates some string of oral sounds that get transmitted through the air to the hearer, who through his auditory organs, receives the sound waves and conveys these to the brain which interprets these symbols to reach a meaning.

Education, on the other hand, is a concept that has been greeted with different definitions. A popular way of defining education has been to relate it to culture. Sociologists define it as a process of cultural transmission and renewal. This definition neatly embraces all that obtains in all types of societies-literate, non-literate, industrialised or agrarian (Davids, 2006). In his own contribution, Peretomode (1993) cited in Amorama-Asite and Oniyama (2006) defines education as a social process whose purpose is to bring about certain desirable behavioural changes in the total development of the individual. This definition held education as a social process because it involves interaction of individuals like teachers and students, parents and children, etc. Fafunwa (1974) cited in Dittimiya, Kalusi and Okpetu (2005) puts education as the aggregate of all the processes by means of which a child or young adult develops abilities, attitudes and other forms of behaviour which are of positive value to the society in which he lives. While Durkheim (1973) cited in Dittimiya *et al* (2012) sees education as the systemic socialization of the young generation by which the latter learns religious and moral beliefs, feelings of nationality and collective opinions of all kinds. Hinge on Durkheim and Fafunwa's position, the educated is transformed by what he knows through acculturation. (Osokoya 1987 in Davids 2006: 13) defined education as the leading out of the in-born powers and potentialities of the individual in the society and the acquisition of skills, aptitudes and competencies necessary for self-realisation and coping with life's problem. Osokoya's definition incorporates the two Latin words-educere and educare, which the word "education" originated from. "Educere" means to draw out or to lead out while "educare" means to nourish, to bring up, or to raise (Kalusi, 2008:32). Be that as it may, it is important to stress here that education cannot only be acquired through formal means, but also through informal and non-formal means.

### **The Importance of Language**

The importance of language in society cannot be overemphasized. It is through language that the culture of a people can be transmitted from generation to generation. This makes language a veritable instrument for socialization. The culture and the history of a people can also be traced through the language they speak. Since the culture of the people can also be taught through the language they speak, the writer would like to describe language as an indelible and infallible linguistic legacy that is acquired through socialization, from the older generation to the younger generation, and then from the younger to posterity.

Thomas (1975) cited in Okorodudu (2011:136) observed that language is like nest-building or hive making, universal and biologically specific activity of human beings. We engage in it communally, compulsively and automatically. We cannot be human without it; our minds would die as surely the bees lost from the hives. From the above assertion, it is crystal clear that both language and human are inseparable. As the

survival of the bees becomes less certain without the hive, so the existence of humans becomes worthless without language. Since language is the medium or vehicle for communicating ideas, for the purpose of integration and development, its importance to man and society cannot be overemphasized.

Language is also a vehicle for the attainment of literacy, and literacy itself is achieved through education. Through the instrument of language, meaningful education can be acquired. Language makes it possible for man to link the past with the present through the expression of relations between things and the actions he performs, thereby paving a way for the transfer of learned behaviour to new situations. Udofot (2000) cited in Udosen (2005:50) describes this process as the symbolic and conceptualizing function of language.

There is also the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, “linguistic determinism” which says that the way human beings perceive the world is a function of their language because language, according to them, determines thought (Sapir, 1949; Whorf, 1949 cited in Udosen, 2005).

Language is a hallmark that distinguishes humans from all other living beings. It is therefore, the potentially communicative medium capable of expressing ideas, concepts, feelings, moods and attitudes. Language also uses symbols to build words. The complete set of words in a language is the vocabulary; the ways these words can be meaningfully combined into larger units and the analysis of such is known as the syntax or grammar of the language while the actual meaning of words and structures is known as the language’s semantics.

### **The National Policy on Education and the Language Situation in Nigeria**

Language prescription for the education system as part of government commitment to the development of education is quite clear. This, no doubt, is enunciated in the National Policy on Education, which was formulated in 1977, and revised in 1981, 1989, 1998, 2004 and 2013. The emergence of this policy was as a result of the outcome of the 1969 National Curriculum Conference geared towards reviewing the colonial curriculum (Taiwa, 1985 and Maduewesi, 2005) cited in Osamaigo and Oniyama (2010). The policy statement is that instruction be given principally in the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community at the pre-primary level.

At the primary school level, the Language of the Immediate Community (LIC) be used as the medium of instruction for the first three years after which the language is to be taught along with French language as subject in primary and Junior Secondary

Schools, while English be used as a medium of instruction through the child's education life.

As the child ascends the ladder of education to the secondary level, more languages may be added to the curriculum. While English remains the medium of instruction, the child is to learn the language of his immediate environment as L<sub>1</sub>, one major Nigerian language other than that of his environment and French as subjects in the curriculum. The policy mentions Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as the three major languages (NPE, 2014:7).

According to Udofot (2000) cited in Udosen (2005) it is obvious from the various proclamations that the goal of language education in Nigeria is to produce bilinguals, trilinguals and quadrilinguals. Anyway, for any person to be called a multilingual, that one should at least be able to demonstrate some level of competence in the use of the languages in question. Be that as it may, if the policy's statement that one of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba be studied for the purpose of promoting national unity, what about the other numerous languages in Nigeria which fall into the minority group by means of this policy. This of course, may lead to the question: How can studying others languages and others not studying your language lead to, or foster national unity and development? What the policy tends to advocate in this regard can be best described as language standardization, that is to say, some languages should be widely accepted than others. Indubitably, the policy seems to have placed other languages on the periphery- the slow track of development. What this has caused the minority languages, with particular reference to Izon language, which is the thrust of this study, is considered under the following sub-heading.

### **The Challenges Facing the Growth and Development of Izon Language**

The Izon language is one of the 450-500 Nigerian languages laden with the minority status. This status has in no small measure affected the Izon language and every other minority language. The policy recommends that at the pre-primary and the first three years of primary education, the language of the immediate community be used as a medium of instruction. The truth of the matter is that the mother tongue medium advocated for pre-primary and primary school level is hardly implemented. The demand for more English, no doubt, has resulted in a new trend in many schools going straight for the English medium. It is obvious that no pre-primary cum primary school that adopts the mother tongue medium, except in the riverine areas or isolated villages where the demand for English usage is very much less. There is no known pre-primary and primary school in the country where the use of English is quite dominant, that use the mother tongue medium. It cannot be gainsaid that such a school will have low patronage, because both parents and pupils prefer the English medium irrespective of what experts and the world think of the mother tongue as a medium at this level.

Dada (1994) cited in Udosen (2005) describes the policy as “a linguistic no man’s land within the education system.”

Another impediment to the growth and development of Izon language is the dearth of teachers to teach the language. What is of serious concern here is that, who teaches the language of the immediate community or even the major Nigerian languages. It is a thing of surprise that the policy is approaching four decades since its formulation, yet the learner’s mother tongue is hardly taught in most parts of Delta, Bayelsa, Edo, Ondo and Rivers, let alone any of the major languages. The case is not said to be different in other parts of the country. The lack of Nigerian languages teachers is a clear explanation for the above. This may move us to ask: whose duty it is to train teachers to implement the language policy geared toward resolving Nigeria’s language problem? The reaction to this question is imperative, because deploying native speakers who are not grounded in the mother tongue to teach the languages, does not lead to the attainment of the ultimate and permanent literacy that is advocated by NPE. Yet another strait-jacket is the attitude of the native speakers of the language. While the major Nigerian languages are likely doing well in schools situated within their native communities, and are yet to explore schools outside their local territories, the minority languages are not that fortunate. The speakers of Izon cum that of the other minority languages are not interested in, or bothered to attain literacy in their language. Udosen (2005) observed that the negative reaction to literacy development in the minority languages by parents, pupils and the larger society tends to inhibit teachers’ efforts in that direction. The result is that while Nigerian universities continue to turn out large numbers of graduate-English teachers every year, there is hardly any Nigerian language teacher (Onakaogu, 2002) cited in Udosen (2005).

A similar problem is the unavailability of resources for the teaching of Izon and other minor Nigerian languages. Attempt is not often made to use learning/teaching materials and activities to create the atmosphere needed for effective learning and teaching. Most teachers are of the mistaken belief that provision of resource materials is the sole responsibility of government or its representative agencies. When the materials are not available, effort is not made at all to improvise when materials are said to be locally available.

An instructional strategy is another challenge. Most teachers of indigenous language still teach them in a way that lacks the *je ne sais quoi* and motivation required to sustain the learners’ interest. If the few teachers we have handle the teaching of the language with minimal apathy, the apathy of the learners is likely to be of maximum proportions.

## **Conclusion**

The Izon language and other minority languages have been studied in relation to the national language policy. The study therefore revealed that there are some loopholes regarding the implementation of the policy, where the languages of the immediate communities are not taught at all. This factor has given birth to other factors, which have uglified the whole situation, and put the Izon language and other minority languages like Efik, Idoma, Kanuri, Nupe, Isekiri, Isoko, Urhobo, Igala, etc, in a slow pace of development. In other to cover these loopholes and put the Izon language as well as other minority languages in the fast track of development, it is expected that both speakers of these languages and the government see this as their responsibility. Anyway, the efforts of Delta and Bayelsa states government in making it possible for the Izon language to be taught at the tertiary level, is highly appreciated. Izon language is being taught at the College of Education, Warri, with very little progress made. It is also taught as a “single course” at the Delta State School of Marine Technology, Burutu. In Bayelsa State, at Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, it is run as a National Diploma Programme with grants to students, from the state government. While at the university of Port-Harcourt, it is taught in the Department of Linguistics and Communications. However, the stupendous inputs of Late Professor (Mrs.) Kay Williamson to the whirlpool of Izon language studies cannot go unnoticed. The efforts of C.B. Agbegha (Mr.) in ensuring the continuity of Izon language studies at College of Education, Warri, is also worthy of mention.

## **Recommendations**

1. The language policy should be revised in such a way that prominence be given to the other languages occupying the minority status.
2. Instead of gaining literacy in major Nigerian languages as a means of fostering national unity, efforts should be geared towards learners acquiring literacy in their mother tongue, or in the language of the immediate environment.
3. The issue of attaining literacy in the major Nigerian languages should be a matter of option as the child climbs the ladder of education to the secondary school.
4. The teaching of Nigerian languages at the grassroots should be strictly monitored by government to ensure efficiency and effectiveness.
5. The Federal and State government should provide grants or scholarship to train teachers in Nigerian languages and assimilate same into the teaching profession by means of automatic employment.
6. Both speakers of Izon and other Nigerian languages should make some effort, financially and other wise to develop their language. No effort should be considered too big a sacrifice to develop our languages (Agbegha, 2010).
7. The few teachers available should intensify their effort in providing learning materials to encourage the learning of the language(s).

8. The Izon language and its minority counterparts should be injected as a course(s) of study into the curriculum of tertiary institutions where the language(s) are spoken.

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