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# IGBO CURRICULUM AT PRIMARY SCHOOL LEVEL A CRITICAL REVIEW

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## **Abstract**

*Language is the unique property of human being and the development of man revolves entirely around the instrumentality of language. It plays a central role in the education of children. It is a channel through which children learn the culture and ethics of their societies, through language children are prepared to be useful and responsible people in the society. This paper therefore highlights the importance of child's mother tongue in the education of a child, examined critically the implementation of Igbo language curriculum at the primary school level. It is discovered from the study that although the curriculum is rich in content, it falls far short of expectation in its implementation. Factors responsible for its non implementation were discussed and recommendations were made on how to ameliorate the situation.*

Language is very important to man's existence and development. According to Nwadike (2008), "Etymologically, language is a system of communication by written or spoken words used by the people of a given area. It makes it possible for men to transmit knowledge across space and time. It is a means of socialization. Through it, people's culture and world view are expressed. It is a sine qua non" (p.13) Evan Engholm a language specialist and educator in Nwadike attested that,

Language is the key to the heart of the people. If we lose the key, we lose the people, if we treasure the key and keep it safe, it will unlock the door to riches, riches that cannot be guessed at from the other side of the door.( p .13)

Language is very important tool for the development of a child. It helps in preparing a child for future life in the society. Since the aim of training them is to make them useful members of the society, it is necessary that educational policy makers put

into considerations the important role of language especially the mother tongue in the development and life of a child while making the policy. By so doing, the future of the nation in general and the child in particular can be assured.

Expressing his view on the important role of language in the development of the nation and a child, Fafunwa (1993) affirmed thus: “no policy on education can appropriately be formulated without first, identifying the overall philosophy and objective of the nation. For Nigeria, there is importance that the nation be free and democratic just and egalitarian, united strong and self reliant. The importance of language in the achievement of these objectives cannot be over-emphasized if the national objectives are to be achieved. It is in the interest of national unity that we emphasis the importance of language in our educational process”.

Relying on the above view, there are language provisions in Nigerian National Policy on Education (2004). The provisions stipulate that every child should be taught in his mother tongue or the language of his immediate community for the first three years. The provisions also stipulate that the mother tongue should be used in pre-primary and early stage of primary education. Consequently, the federal government places greater emphasis on the teaching and learning of the three major Nigerian languages namely: Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba in National policy on education. The National policy states that:

In addition to appreciating the importance of language in educational process and as a means of preserving the people’s culture, the government considered it to be in the interest of national unity ... in this connection, the government considered the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa Igbo and Yoruba (p.9).

However, the aim of this paper is to examine critically the implementation of Igbo language curriculum at the primary school level in order to determine the extent to which it is geared towards fulfilling the long term goal of the country’s educational process.

### **Importance of Language /Child’s Mother Tongue**

The importance of language in general and child’s mother tongue in particular to human existence and development cannot be over emphasized. This is evident in the role language plays in human life. Language shapes peoples’ perception of reality. Language is culture, language creates culture. It is a dynamic tool for human civilization. It is man’s identity. It differentiates man from animal and other human beings .It shapes peoples thought and it produces thought. The first language that a child grows into is his mother tongue. It is therefore in the right direction that peoples’ energies especially government, teachers, parents and relations, should be directed towards encouraging and

enforcing mother tongue education. It also becomes evident that in the education of the child, care should be taken to acculturate him properly in the language which serves not only as a medium of communication but also as a means of creating awareness in him concerning his environment, culture and ethics.

It is based on these numerous importance of the mother tongue in the formation process of a child that this paper intends to look into the Igbo language curriculum with a view of making some important recommendations that if adopted by the government, policy makers, implementers and teachers, would enhance children interest in the language and thus, help them to grow up and become balanced individuals. It will also prepare them for leading roles in the society.

### **Igbo Language Curriculum at Primary School Level**

The language provisions in Nigeria National policy on education accord relevance to indigenous Nigerian language. As a result, the following stipulations were made in the policy:

- i. That every Nigerian child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages apart from his/her mother tongue. This is to help in fostering unity and preserving the culture.
- ii. That in the pre-primary school and early primary stage, the medium of instruction will be the mother tongue or the language of the community
- iii. That in the primary school, the mother tongue will initially be the medium of instruction and will be replaced with English at later stage.

However, it is obvious that for the policy makers to meet up with the above laws and agreements there must be an implementation. This is because policies become effective only when they are implemented.

A cursory look at the Igbo language curriculum at the primary school level reveals that in the first three years, emphasis is on the three branches of Igbo language namely: language (Asusu), culture (omenala) and literature (Agumagu). Topics that make up these branches include, listening imitation (pronunciation) spelling, introduction to reading and writing, formation of words and simple sentences, parts of speech, identification of things in the child's environment, greetings, environmental cleanliness, counting of days of the week, family, good character, health, exercise, duties of children in a family, duties of parents in a family, Igbo food, children's bad behaviour, dialogue on respect, how to receive visitors, rhymes and children songs, folktales, riddles and jokes. At the higher levels of primary education, the emphasis is still of the three branches of language. The topics Includes illustration of things, saying of time, simple sentences, 'Na' as an auxiliary verb, simple proverbs, letter writing, parts of speech, pronouns, punctuation marks, idioms, simple poems, 'Ga' as an

auxiliary verb, riddles, composition letter writing, types of diseases, youths and good health, characteristics of Igbo people, occupation of Igbo people, drama, poems etc.

At a glance, the curriculum appears rich and enough as it touches on many aspects of language. However, in practice, investigations reveal that the story is not the same. It is quite an obvious fact that the actual teaching of the language in the primary school is nothing less than making the best out of a bad situation. As important as the implementation of the curriculum is to both the child and the nation, it is unfortunate that it has for many years been bedeviled by many setbacks. The setback constitute impediment to proper implementation of Igbo language curriculum in primary school.

### **Factors Militating against the Implementation of Igbo Language Curriculum in Primary School**

One of the major setbacks in the implementation is non availability of qualified Igbo language teachers. Most teachers in primary school did not study Igbo language in school. For this reason it is always difficult for someone to give out what he/she does not have. Such teachers, shows nonchalant attitude in the teaching of Igbo language. They use time allocated to Igbo in the school time table to teach other subjects or do any other things that are more important to them.

Another impediment is insufficient time allocated to Igbo language in the school time table. This makes it impossible to cover the content of the curriculum. Because the government placed greater emphasis on the teaching of English language, it appears virtually every day on the school time-table while Igbo appears just about two times.

Non availability of adequate books and materials in the teaching of Igbo language is also a serious problem observed in the curriculum. Books and materials needed for teaching of Igbo in primary school are not many and the available ones are of low standard or quality. Texts like Igbo children literature are nowhere to found. There are no children story books as they are available in large quantity and of good quality in English. There are no children Igbo literature written in any of the three genres of literature; novel, drama and poetry recommended for pupils in the curriculum. In primary schools it is only one Igbo text book called Mbido Igbo 1-6 that is available for children. Mbido Igbo contained some of the topics in the curriculum. There is nothing like children's literature books in Igbo or children culture books in Igbo. Mbido Igbo is seen as being not enough to sustain the interest of the pupils in the study of the language. Children like to read materials like story books that are of interest to them and it is believed that generous provision of interesting reading materials in Igbo will stimulate their interests in the study of Igbo language.

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That is why Anozie in Ifechelobi (2009:109) lamented “we have been all alone too busy with ourselves arrogated more important matters of state to care about what books of literature (if any) our children read at school”.

Among the setbacks is the strong recognition accorded to English language. At the moment, English language serves as an official language in the country but there is yet no national language or language for Nigeria in principles. Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are seen as Nigeria national languages. The call for adoption or retention of English may also be due to the growing status of English both nationally and internationally (Igbanusi 2002:27) English is the language in use in most formal situations in Nigeria. Because of the strong recognition accorded to English language, people have come to regard access to it as synonymous with access to educational, economic, social and political advantage. As a result, the role of indigenous language is de emphasized.

Parents bad attitude to indigenous language in no small way, affects the Igbo language curriculum. Some Igbo parents especially the elites encourage their children not to speak the Igbo language at home and many take their children to schools where the English language is the sole language of instruction.

Many of them prefer buying English novels to Igbo novels for their children to help improve their vocabularies in English language instead of their indigenous language. By so, doing parents indirectly make their children foreigners in their own native land. They also deprive their children their indigenous language forgetting that when children are denied their mother tongue through neglect or ignorance or by being forced by parents to speak a foreign language in preference to an indigenous language, a great harm is done on both the neglected language and the children. Children are made to lose total interest in their language.

Attitude of some private nursery/primary school proprietors over the indigenous language is also among the setbacks in Igbo curriculum. It is a common believe among these people that recognitions accorded to a school depends mainly on how fluent their pupils are in speaking English language. Some of these schools do not offer Igbo language in their schools. Emphasis is more on English language hence, in some of these schools; there are enough English language teachers for all the classes. Each class has special English language teacher where as for Igbo language, the number is inadequate. In these schools the language of instruction at all levels of primary is English.

Another setback in the curriculum is that it failed to take into considerations the exceptional and special children. This had adversely affected such pupils. There are no available materials designed with them in mind and even if they were, there would be few specialized teachers to use the materials in teaching them.

There is lack of audio-visual materials for teaching Igbo in most primary schools in the country. Where available, they are inadequate and ineffectively used. It is observed that story telling which form part of the curriculum in Igbo language, no longer enjoys the pride of place it enjoyed in the olden days in homes and in schools. In some schools today, stories when told at all are told in English instead of Igbo. It is the same with riddles and jokes. By doing so, teachers deprive the children of the advantages associated with storytelling. Apart from being a veritable instrument for acculturation, it serves as a source of training in reading habit. That is why the ability to listen attentively and sit down for long hours listening to stories can later be useful to reading. Children can go from storytelling to story reading (Egwurube, 1995).

### **Conclusion**

The importance of language in general to human existence and development cannot be over emphasized. Studies have shown that there is a close relationship between the medium of instruction and the child's cognitive development. It is observed that language is central to human activities and therefore of prime importance. The purpose of this paper has been to review the implementation of Igbo curriculum in primary school. The paper is of the opinion that language, especially child's mother tongue is important in the child's education. Based on this, the paper argues that a lot still needs to be done if the Igbo language in particular and Nigeria languages in general are to enjoy a befitting status in schools as presently English language does. If the above recommendations are adopted by the government, parents, teachers and general public the situation will be better.

### **Recommendations**

It is obvious from the foregoing, that language policies are not adequately implemented in Nigeria. There is need to create awareness among Nigerians of the importance of indigenous language in the development of any nation. Goals in the study of indigenous Nigerian languages are not just for unity and preservation of cultural heritage as was stipulated in the National policy on education. The goal of national development should not be ignored. Since the study of Igbo as well as other Nigerian languages is suffering serious setbacks, there is need for urgent steps to be taken to improve the implementation of Igbo language curriculum in primary schools. This could help in laying the solid foundation needed for national development.

The indigenous language should be given more attention. The focus should be to develop languages that are not allowed to develop. The instruction to chose one of the major local languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) in addition to ones indigenous language in all the educational institutions at the primary, post primary and post secondary levels as was already provided by the government in the National policy on education should be implemented. Also, there should be frequent supervisions of schools and teachers of

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these languages. Frequent activities such as workshops, seminars, symposiums, cultural activities to enhance the important of local language should be organized.

The success of any curriculum at the implementation levels pre-suppose the availability of trained teachers. It is therefore the duty of the government to recruit trained teachers and send to schools to teach Igbo language as well as other Nigerian languages at all levels of education in the country. The ministries should encourage studies in mother-tongue education by sponsoring teachers for service courses.

Effective teaching and learning of Igbo language as well as other Nigeria languages and availability of trained and qualified teachers in these languages should be among the criteria for government approval of any private nursery/primary and secondary schools in Nigeria.

There should be an amendment in school time tables to ensure that equal time should be allocated for to both English language and Igbo language lessons. Igbo language should be taught everyday in the school. This will make both the teacher and the pupils to develop interest in it. The public should be enlightened on the importance of their language to erase the impression created by the overvalued place of English language in the school system.

Parents should encourage their children to read books and materials written in Igbo language. They should buy for them children literature books in Igbo to help them develop their vocabularies in Igbo language. They should also find time to tell them stories in Igbo folklore at home.

The curriculum planners should put into consideration the special and disabled children and their teachers when planning the curriculum in future. They should invite some Igbo teachers for normal and special children at all levels of primary. They should also provide available teaching aids /materials for these special children. This will help in language acquisition by the children. According to Onwuchekwa and Nwazoke (1995), “disabilities affect the language competence and subsequent performance of the disabled in examinations as the normal, gifted and disabled pupils take the same examinations and use the same syllabi. They stated further that when the syllabus modified through remedial measures/approaches, linkage use of relevant teaching aids and techniques; the language acquisition and performances of the normal and disabled children will be enhanced, thereby enabling national development.

The government should provide for all the schools both primary and secondary enough audio visual aids such as radio, television, tape recorder, real objects, pictures etc for the teaching of Igbo language and other subjects in the country. This will help to make the teachings of languages interesting and real. It is also relevant to enhance assimilation by the pupils.

Igbo literary writers are encouraged to pay more attentions on children's literature especially those centered on developing young ones positively. According to Ifechelobi,(2009:108) the need for positive human development becomes relevant when we realize that "the child is the father of the man" and the future of this nation lies in his/her hand. The writer has all it takes to build up these future hopes, and must realize that if an item (moral values) misses its target, another would strike home because there is no vacuum in life.

There should be recommended books in children's Igbo literature at the primary school level. Other relevant books such as Igbo culture books, folktales books for children at primary school level should also be recommended. This will help the children to learn the culture of their society and also the dos and don'ts. They are being trained to become leaders of tomorrow.

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