

THE USE OF IGBO LANGUAGE IN TEACHING AND RESEARCH: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS.

M. N. Njoku
Department of Igbo Language,
Federal College Education,
Okene.
Kogi State.

Abstract

Igbo language is one of the major Nigerian languages. This is due to the fact that it is one of the most popular languages in Nigeria. Language plays an important role in teaching and learning situation, not only as a subject taught in school but also as the vehicle through which information is shared between the learner and the teacher. It is therefore important to use an "appropriate" language in education. The word "appropriate" in this sense means language that can effectively capture and interpret all the aspirations of the teacher to the learner in a way that he or she best understands. The trend all over the world especially amongst the developed countries of the world is that the mother tongue is used in school system as the medium of instruction. It is however sad to note that Nigeria, a multilingual nation with over 400 living languages seems to be reluctant to tap into the benefits of using the mother tongue in her system of education. This paper tries to look into the various challenges that confront the adoption of Igbo and other Nigeria indigenous languages as a medium of instruction in formal education in Nigeria and their solutions.

Igbo language is the language of the Igbo people of the south eastern Nigeria. The language is recognised and classified as one of the major Nigerian languages (MNLS). Others are Hausa and Yoruba languages. Nigeria, undoubtedly, is a complex multilingual nation with over five hundred languages in existence (Omego, 2005). Out of this figure, only a few can boast of standard orthographies, standard written varieties and long tradition of writing. Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba possess these criteria; hence the Federal Government of Nigeria through the National Policy on Education (NPE) recognizes and appreciates their importance in enhancing social interaction, fostering national unity, overall national development and preserving culture. Consequently, the government further recommends their teaching and learning in schools across the nation both as L1 (first language) and L2 (second language). This is also aimed at accelerating their development and enhancing their status.

In terms of development, Emenanjo (1993) in Aziza (1998), classified Igbo and two other major Nigerian languages as developed based on the fact that they have established orthographies, standard written varieties, long traditions of writing, large and varied corpora (a collection of all the writing of a particular kind) of written literature, varieties of text and dynamic metalanguage. All these qualities facilitate the literary development of the language. However, it is very pertinent to note that the development of the written form of Igbo and other African languages was initiated by the early Christian missionaries during the colonial period. Prior to their advent, Igbo and other African languages only existed orally. According to Asiegbu (2006):

Not until 19th century, some thousands of years after the Igbo employed their language to forge trade contacts and agreements, form governments and elaborate political systems, create history and develop agriculture, perform household chore and liturgical worship, did a scientific study of language take.

In fact, through the efforts of the early missionaries and ex-Igbo slaves especially, Olaudah Equiano, there emerged series of publications in terms of literatures, dictionaries, Igbo versions of the Bible, extracts from prayer books and books on proverbs and grammar. Afigbo (1975), strongly maintains that Olaudah Equiano is important in the history of writing an Igbo history and orthography as he was the first to give a written account of Igbo government and politics, Igbo economy, warfare, social life and general culture as well as the origin of Igbo people". It is sufficient to note that the literary development of any language is highly essential for its acquisition, teaching and learning, growth, proper utilization, research and overall development.

In these times characterised by Information and Communication Technologies (ITCs), the need to properly develop and empower Igbo and other Nigerian languages for effective teaching and research and in other aspects of national development cannot be over-emphasized, hence the relevance of this discussion titled "The use of Igbo language in teaching and research: challenges and solution.

Igbo Language As A Medium of Instruction

The effectiveness of using the language a learner is comfortable with, a language in which he can express his thoughts translate his internal ideas into articulate sentences has been established by many scholars. Language and culture are inseparable and to separate a child from his language and culture at an early stage of his/her school education is to make him/her have no regard for his culture (UMO, 2001). Using another language other than the mother tongue as a medium of instruction impairs the development of the child's personality and ability (Olawaju, 2006). Igbo language is the mother tongue of all the Igbos. Igbos are a group of dedicated, strongly built, hardworking and resourceful people living in the south east geopolitical zone in Nigeria. Igbo language is very important to all the people of Igbo race. Mother tongue helps in understanding the values and problems of the society (Awoniyi, 1982). So the qualities of the Igbo people can be seen from the Igbo language.

Colonialism brought in English language as a lingua franca for the country Nigeria. The idea then was for the colonial missionaries to communicate the Christian faith to the people. So far so good, one can then pose to ask after 55 years of the use of English as official means of communication in government and business, where are we? We have not developed technologically and otherwise and also we have lost our rich indigenous culture especially cultural heritage of Igbo land which could have helped us. A research showed that language is responsible for the Japans first rank in the whole world in the area of technology (Fafunwa, 1989).

Even studies have established the effectiveness of teaching learners in their L1; notable among such studies is the Ife six year primary project (SYPP) which proved that learners achieved better when taught in their mother tongue or the language of the immediate community. A research was carried out by Ezeudu (2011) titled "Effects of language of instruction on junior secondary school (JSS) students' academic achievement in basic science" among the junior secondary school students in Oji-River Local Government Area of Enugu state, using Igbo language to teach some selected students in Basic science and English language was used to teach other group the same topic in Basic science. The result reveals that those in Igbo language class performed better than the control group taught with English language (Ezeudu, 2011).

Also the National Policy on Education (2004) section 3 states that "Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary schools is initially the mother tongue of the immediate community and at a later stage, English". The policy further states that "In addition to appreciating the importance of language in educational process, and as a means of preserving people's culture, the government considers it in the best interest of the national unity that each child should be encouraged to

learn one of the three major languages other than his mother tongue". Emenanjo (1996) states that "the training of the mind in the understanding of the world is best done and realised in the languages in which the students are familiar". To me, the language that a learner is most familiar with can be any of the following: the learner's mother tongue (MT), first language (L1) or language of the immediate community (LIC) and so; it is important to make use of same as language of instruction in formal education.

Although the National policy on education favours the development and use of the mother tongue in education but in implementation, very little has been done or achieved in this regard. There are a lot of challenges facing the adoption and complete use of Igbo and other Nigerian languages in formal education and it is the quest of this paper to identify the various challenges and as well as proffer the solutions to these problems. Oluwole(2008) while lending his voice to the potency of indigenous languages as a medium of instruction to teach in modern education states, "it is therefore generally acceptable that in teaching/learning process, the mother tongue of a child is of utmost importance for one thing, it categorises a large part of the child's environment, that is, it has names of all the objects, actions, ideas, attributes, and so on that are so important to him as well as to the society." I quite agree with the view that a child's mother tongue, an indigenous language or a Nigerian language is the most appropriate vehicle to convey the theme, concepts and subject matter of what is to be learnt to the Igbo or Nigerian child.

Olanrewaju(1986) enquires, "In what type of language will such a heterogeneous group be taught?" Of course, it has to be in the mother tongue or language of the immediate environment which is common to the young and old. Under this condition, it will be easy to understand the process of science and hence, application of these processes to solve problem confronting man will not be too difficult. Evidences from the second international science studies shows that Japanese primary schools children came first in primary science among the countries of the world with Nigerian pupils coming last (Olagbaju and Akinsowon, 2014).

The first challenge that stares anyone that wants to make use of a Nigerian language to teach in modern education in the face is the clear realisation that Igbo and most of the other indigenous Nigerian languages are not fully developed. Taiwo (1976) asserts that Kiswahili never improved until it was adopted as a Lingua Franca and the language of schools in Tanzania in 1967. This confirms that the indigenous languages in Nigeria need to be trusted and assigned more defined roles in the different sectors of the country. To Taiwo (1979), the mother tongue has very little incentive for development and use in education especially in most African countries where English (or other foreign languages) is used as the lingua franca and the medium of instruction in schools. However, the development and unrestricted use of a child's home language or mother tongue in education will promote universal basic education and equal access to education across Nigeria and the African continent.

The National Policy on Education (2004) recommends that the Nigeria primary school child should be well grounded in his or her mother apart from learning English and/or any other languages as the L2 or L3. The National language centre (1975) in a paper titled "The importance of language learning on the overall development of the child in primary schools: solutions to the Nigerian problems" states, "For education to be meaningful, the child should be taught in his mother tongue which he can both read and write". The use of mother tongue in teaching is a practical issue and students that are taught with an indigenous language have to struggle with the understanding of the foreign language which is being used as the language of instruction as well as the complexities of the concept that is being learnt. Taiwo (1976) states, "There is no favourable means of rapport between the teacher and a child on his first day at school than a common language, which is the child's mother tongue. As the child progresses in his adventure of schooling, the mother tongue is a reassuring means of acquiring concepts and building them into ideas

and skills". If Nigeria as a nation is serious in her quest to raise a generation of citizens that are academically sound, then we must revert to using the Nigerian languages as a medium of instruction in formal schools.

The Challenges of Using Igbo and Other Nigerian Languages To Teach In Schools

Many scholars have studied and made use of mother tongue (Nigerian languages) to teach in formal education and some of the challenges encountered are discussed in this work. Taiwo (1976) opined that "Nigerian languages are rich in traditional settings, but they are generally insufficient to cope with the formal curriculum and concludes that this insufficiency is a major problem". Language is a tool for expressing our inner most view, feelings, desires, thoughts and experiences, the challenges therefore is that there are certain concepts in education which may not be adequately conveyed by any of the Nigerian languages. A number of factors work against the effective use of Nigerian languages in teaching and these are summarised under the following themes:

1. Resource – related factor.
2. Attitudinal factors
3. Orthographic factors
4. Legislative / policy related factors

Resource –Related Factors

This deals with human and capital resources – related challenges of using Nigerian languages to teach in formal schools. Some of these problems include;

1. Lack of qualified or trained teachers in the (Nigerian) languages.
2. General student – apathy to studying Igbo and other Nigerian languages in the higher institutions of learning in Nigeria.
3. Low incentive to learn and specialise in Nigerian languages: this is because the English language is made compulsory in Nigerian secondary schools and also as a major pre-requisite for admission into higher institutions of learning while any of the Nigerian languages is not.
4. The government has not committed enough funds to the development of materials such as text books, teaching aids and other materials in Nigerian languages. Little or nothing is being done by the Nigerian government in the area of research in order to develop and make available these materials for the teachers.

Attitudinal Factors

1. The status or prestige the English language and other foreign languages enjoy in Nigeria: the English language serves as the lingua franca and the medium of instruction in both secondary and tertiary institutions. A sound knowledge of the language can as well boost an applicant's chances or prospects of getting a good job. Thus, parents and students will stop at nothing to learn and make a good grade in the subject. This attitude has therefore endangered all the Nigerian languages.
2. Only a few Nigerian languages have been developed or made enough to express new experiences and concepts in Modern education courtesy of the most recent drive in the field of language engineering; e.g. gifted and talented students, personalised learning and teaching, active votes, electronic white boards etc. and in other subjects like Geography, Mathematics and English.
3. Negative attitude of the elite parents: Most of the elites and educated parents prefer to communicate with their children in the English language. They feel that on leaving school, a student should have attained an acceptable level of achievement in English. Some illiterates would rather employ the service of a teacher of English language to take their children in extra lessons than a teacher of any of the Nigerian languages. Ogunbiyi (2008) opines, "That most Nigerian parents prefer to send their

children to English schools”. Some parents even go to the extent of not allowing their children to watch films in Nigerian languages as that hinders their acquisition of the English language (according to those parents).

4. The parents, teachers, students and society at large view fluency in the use of the English language as a symbol or emblem of being educated. Parents believe that the only proof of literacy that their children can exhibit is to communicate in English and they tend to look down on friends and children that cannot express themselves in the English language as uneducated or uncivilised. Unfortunately, even in religious circles, clerics that cannot preach in the English language are
5. seen as uneducated, local or crude. Thus, everyone keeps struggling to speak and learn the foreign language because by the attitude or standard of the society; it offers a kind of prestige or class to its speakers.

Legislative/Policy-Related Factors

1. According to the language policy statement as stated in the National Policy on Education (2004), the English language is to assume the position or status of the language of instruction or education from primary four and must be progressively used for the purpose onwards. The National Policy on Education (2004) section 3 states “Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue (MT) of the immediate community and at a later stage, English”. Thus, legislature by way of the policy statement is a major challenge that confronts the use of Nigerian languages to teach in formal schools. The National Policy on Education does not support the use of any Nigerian language as a medium of instruction from the upper primary school.
2. Adoption of English language as the language of the government in Nigeria (lingua franca) and the importance attached to the knowledge of the language by employers has made many people (including students, parents and teachers) to consider the Nigerian languages inferior to the English language. The poor attitude thus poses a great challenge to using any of the Nigerian languages to teach.
3. There is a big problem in the interpretation and implementation of the language policy as contained in the National Policy on Education. There is an unfair attempt to escape the important question of which language is to be used in a multilingual community as the medium of instruction in the pre-primary level. Also, the policy fails to explain how the teacher caters for the bridge or gap that exists at the level of changing the language of education in primary four.
4. There is a poor or lack of proper monitoring from the side of the education officers (EO) and officials of the federal and state ministries of education. Though the National Policy on Education (2004) states that the mother tongue (a Nigerian language) and/or language of the immediate community (LIC) should be the language of initial literacy at the pre-primary and junior primary levels and of the adult and non-formal education. But in practice, most private nursery and primary schools teach even the pre-primary and junior primary classes using the English language as a medium of instruction without any restriction from the ministry of education officials who are never available.

Ogunbiyi (2008) submits that in spite of the government’s position on the status of the English language and the Nigerian languages, some schools still relegate Nigerian languages to the background and promote the teaching of English and French languages.

Emenanjo (1996) raises serious questions about the workability of the National policy on education and some of questions are:

- i. Don't the statements in the policy constitute just a statement of intent rather than a serious programme for implementation? All that have been said in the National policy were mere saying there have not been any implementation.
- ii. If the mother tongue (MT) or the language of the immediate community is considered so important at the pre-primary level as an integral part of a child's culture and the link between the home and the school, why should it be "principal" and not solely used at this level? If they really want implementation, mother tongue would have been said to be used in all levels of education without conditions.
- iii. How do people identify the languages of the immediate environment in pluralistic setting like the urban centres or international communities like Universities?
- iv. Why is the policy silent on Pidgin – one of the country's major languages?

Also, Emenanjo (1996) who sighted the observations made by the "panel on the teaching of Igbo in the Imo state school system and the implementation of the national language policy". The panel was established and began work in 1985, the panel was charged to come up with a policy on Igbo in particular and language in general and the following observations were made. There is still lack of awareness on the part of the highly placed officials: supervisors/inspectors of education, principals/headmasters of schools and practising teachers of language policy as stated in the national policy on education. The lack of awareness on its part is responsible for the:

- a. The non-sponsorship of practising teachers to relevant courses, conferences and seminars on languages.
- b. Relatively inferior status accorded Nigerian languages in the school system in particular and the society in general.
- c. Lack of incentives by way of in-service courses with attendant incremental benefits for serving teachers, and bursaries, scholarship for would be teachers.

The panel also observed that Igbo is not being taught or tolerated in most nursery schools in the state. Igbo language is not being consistently used as the medium of instruction in the "junior" primary classes nor is it being seriously taught as a "core"

subject in upper primary classes. Osborn (2007) opines that the language of education even now remains predominantly English. Although the national policy on education has made the necessary provision for the use of Nigerian languages (mother tongue) in schools, the problem as always, is the implementation.

The government does not enforce the provision of its policy. The policy assumes that a language of instruction at the secondary school level is English whereas the case has been very clearly made that students perform better when their mother tongue is the language of instruction for all subjects (Fafunwa, 1989).

Orthography – Related Factors

1. Lack of literature in Nigerian languages hinders the sufficiency of the language as a medium of instruction. Most of the textbooks are written in English language and so, teachers are "handicapped" thus cannot embark on such a noble venture.
2. Another problem here is that most Nigerian languages do not have standard orthography. For example, there are confirmed cases of variation in the orthography of the Igbo language.

Wikipedia webpage :[http://en. Wikipedia. org/wiki/language_of_ Nigeria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/language_of_Nigeria), states that the number of languages currently estimated and catalogued in Nigeria is 521 (five hundred and twenty one). A breakdown of this number includes 510 living languages, 2 second languages without native speakers

(English and French) and nine extinct languages. It is sad to note however that only about a hundred Nigerian languages have been fully developed with standard orthography as at the year 1978 according to Brann and Max (1978).

The Solution to the Challenges of Using Igbo and other Nigerian languages to Teach in Schools

A lot has been said about the importance and challenges of using Igbo and other Nigerian languages as a medium of instruction in Nigerian formal education, but this work will not be complete without the suggestion of possible solutions to some of the problems identified. Musilimi (1999) in a study on implementing the mother tongue – medium policy in the lower primary classes, concludes “On the other hand, the mother tongue instructional policy needs a review”. It is evident that majority of teachers in the public schools use the bilingual medium despite the stipulation of the use of the mother tongue in the lower primary schools in the National Policy on Education (NPE). There is need for more definitive pedagogical approach in the medium of instruction at the lower primary classes. While Musilimi (1999) places all the blame on the teachers, I am of the opinion that the federal and state ministries of education needs to do more (than it is being currently done) in the enforcement of the policy statement on the use of mother tongue or Nigerian languages in education. There is a dire need for constant inspection of what goes in the private and public nursery and primary schools in order to enforce total adherence to the use of Nigerian languages in schools.

Though, Nigerian languages have been described as grossly insufficient to meet the demand of modern education, they should therefore be developed and the orthography needs to improve upon especially in Igbo language where there is controversy. Emenanjo (1976) is of the view that something drastic needs to be done concerning the orthography of most Nigerian languages. Taiwo (1976) is of the view that Hausa orthography is fully developed, while Emenanjo (1976) states that more should be done in the area of developing the orthography of the minority languages in Nigeria.

Textbooks and educational materials in the Nigerian languages should be developed to cope with the present realities of modern education. There is equally need for national re-orientation and awareness on the benefits attached to making use of Nigerian languages in schools. Parents, students, teachers, and other stake holders in education need to be educated on the dangers of relegating our local or indigenous languages for a foreign language. The government needs to come up with a policy that makes a sound knowledge of and/or success in at least one Nigerian language part of the criteria for securing gainful employment in the country.

The mass media – print and electronic, should take up the responsibility to promote the status of Nigerian languages. Also, orthographies of Nigerian languages should be standardised, especially the minority languages to meet up the demands of education. Emenanjo (1996) stresses the importance of training and re-training Nigerian language teachers. He also suggested that by way of incentives, the federal government should subvert courses in Nigerian languages in the institution of higher learning. In addition, Emenanjo (1999) while proffering a solution to the dearth of Nigerian language teachers suggested that producing graduate teachers in the right quality and quantity for All Nigerian languages is the only way by which we can meet the challenges of Nigerian languages to teach in formal schools. In his words, “practising teachers of Nigerian languages need to be updated in content, methods and language technology”. Obayan(1992) lauded the efforts of state ministries of education (as in the River state Reader’s project) and of the NERDC (Nigerian Educational Research Development Council), the Gaskiya Corporation (for Hausa language) in the development of curriculum materials in indigenous languages but he was quick to note that there is more to be done, especially in the area of non-text materials. According to Obayan (1998), “the resources outside the school system (traditional poetry and drama and cinematographic resources) still have to be fully developed”.

Conclusion

In conclusion, no language (foreign or indigenous) is inferior to other. Every language has the capacity to adequately function in whatever role it is assigned to.

However, the only impediment to the successful use of Igbo and other Nigerian languages in formal education is that they have not been fully developed to cope with the demands of formal education. If the required attention and steps were given to the development or standardization of the numerous indigenous languages in the country, Nigerian languages and indeed, all the numerous indigenous languages in Africa can be used in education either as the language of education or a school subject in formal education. All that is needed for the successful implementation of the indigenous language education policy is a “will – to – do” and the implementation of the right language policy by the government of Nigeria.

References

- Asiegbu, A. E. (2006). Igbo language Under Threat: A study in Endangered Languages. In Njoku, O. (ed) *Maryland Studies*. Vol.3.
- Awoniyi, T.A. (1982). *The teaching of African languages*. London: Holdef and Stoughton.
- Aziza, R. O (1998). Nigerian Languages and National development. In Aromunlase (ed) *Nigerian languages for National Development*. Ibadan: Loyeni Communication.
- Brann, B. & Max, C. (1978). *Multilingualism and Education in Nigeria*. International centre for Research on Bilingualism, Laval University, Quebec. Imprimeur Canada: Depot Legal (Quebec) Ziemetrimester.
- Emenanjo, E.N. (1996). Languages and the National Policy on Education: implementation and prospects. Fafunwa foundation @ internet journal of education. <http://wwwfafunwafoundation.tripod.com>. (retrieved, August 15th, 2015).
- Eze, S. & Eze, C. (2008). Using Nigerian indigenous languages to promote science and technology application. A paper presented at the 4th annual conference of the Igbo studies Association held at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
- Ezeudu, F. O. (2011). Effect of language of instruction on junior secondary school (JSS) students' academic achievement in basic science. A paper presented at the 2011 Igbo studies association (ISA) conference in Washington DC. April, 2011.
- Fafunwa, B., Macaulay, I. & Sokoga, J.A. (1989). *Education in mother tongue: The Ife primary education project Ibadan*: University Press Limited.
- Federal Government of Nigeria (2004). *National Policy on Education*. 4th Edition. Lagos, Nigeria: NEDRC Press.
- Muslimi, Y. Y. (1999). Implementing the mother tongue medium policy in the lower primary classes. A case study of selected primary schools in Saki West Local Government Area of Oyo state, Nigeria. <http://www.unilorin.edu.ng/unilorin/journals/education/ije/june1999>. Searched on 20th August 2015.
- Obayan, P.A.I. (1992). Language Issues in Basic Education and Literacy. Conference paper, UNESCO Institute of Education, Hamburg.

- Ogunbiyi, O. (2008). The Challenges of Language Teaching in the 21st Century. Faculty of Education, Lagos state University, Ojo, Nigeria. *Medwell Journals Pakistan Journal of social sciences* 5 (4:) 279-299.
- Olagbaju, O.O. & Akinsowon, F.I.(2014). The use of Nigerian languages in Formal Education: Challenges and Solution. *Journal of Education and Practice*. www.iiste.org.ISSN 2222-1735. Retrieved August 10th, 2015.
- Olarewaju, A. O. (2006). Using Nigerian Languages as Media of Instruction to enhance Science and Technologydevelopment, an action delayed. <http://www.newhorizon.org/intoscience.org>(accessed July 12,2015).
- Olarewaju, A.O. (1986). Students under – achievement in science, some suggested remedies. 27th annual conference proceedings of science Teachers Association of Nigeria (STAN). 143-147.
- Oluwole, D.A.(2008). The Impact of mother tongue on students achievement in English language in Junior Secondary School Certificate Examination in Western Nigeria. Department of Guidance and Counselling, University of Ibadan, Ibadan. *Kamja – Raj Journal of social sciences*. [http://www.Kres Publishers. Com/02 –Journals /JSS – 17-0- 000-000-2008](http://www.KresPublishers.Com/02-Journals/JSS-17-0-000-000-2008). Retrieved August 10th,2015.
- Omego, S. (2005). Enhancing the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages through multimedia information and communication technologies. In Ndimele (ed) *Globalization and the study of languages in Africa*. Port Harcourt: Grand Orbit Communication and Emhai Press.
- Osborn, D.(2007). African languages –Re: “Cultural Education and Development” Nigeria.
- Taiwo, D. (1976). The mother tongue as a means of promoting equal access to education in Nigerian Languages: Problems and Solutions. *The united Nations Educational and Scientific Cultural Organisation, Linguistic Documentation for developing Countries: Cases, Problems and Solutions*.
- Umo, U. C. (2001). Effect of games on the achievement and interest of junior secondary school students in Igbo grammar. Unpublished Ph.D Thesis. University of Nigeria Nsukka.
- Wikipedia webpage :http://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/language_of_Nigeria,