

THE CHALLENGES OF USING IGBO LANGUAGE FOR ENLIGHTENMENT IN OUR JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS AND VILLAGES: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

Language is a means of communication. Igbo as a major Nigerian language, has so far existed only as a school subject in the curriculum. However, scholars have been advocating mother tongue as a medium of instruction (Adewuyi, 1996 and Ezejideaku, 1996). This paper sets out to discuss what language is, its roles in education and communication. It also discussed what enlightenment is and the problems that may confront the user of Igbo language in the course of enlightening students and villagers. **Introduction What is Language**

Language according to Ezejideaku (1995) is a vehicle for conveying the culture and tradition of people that own it. This implies that language must be the pivot on to which the appreciation of culture revolves. Awoniyi (1978) lays credence to the above definition when he opines that: "There is no doubt in saying that the language through which a child develops into an adult member and comprehends the life and culture of is/her society is the indigenous language or what can be referred to as mother tongue which is the purest manifestation of culture most especially African culture. Afolayan (1987) on his part sees mother tongue as the only language of a monolingual person, which is acquired naturally in his natural environment and which meets all his linguistic needs. This simply means that it is usually the sequential first language of a bi or multilingual person.

It may however be observed, that these definitions revolve around communication. Communication on its own is a social art whereby ideas, opinions, thoughts and concepts are interchanged and shared between at least two people. It also entails interaction and it is a human activity (Widdowson, 1978: 2).

Roles of Mother Tongue (M.T) in Education

Language is a human means of communication as such the cornerstone of any educational process. It plays a very vital role in education as instruction and explanation are given and received through language. This is why Adeyanju (1989: 2) says "The place of language of instruction in any educational process is very significant if that system should be successful". In the same vein Ezejideaku (1996) considers it unreasonable or total stupidity for Nigeria to think that she can realise scientific and technological advancement with English language as the medium of instruction in our schools. This means that for a child to assimilate or gain from any educational process, he/she must be thought in that language where he/she has all the linguistic facility to express himself. This fact was proved by the Ife Primary Education Research Project which was carried out by Babs Fafunwa between 1970 - 1978 where the pupils thought with mother tongue performed better than those thought with English language.

Furthermore, perhaps it was to re-emphasise an established fact that mother tongue or indigenous language are yelled for in order to facilitate high level of literacy and comprehension or understanding in teaching and learning processes that even the missionaries resorted to it. This is why Idowu (1998) opined that:

... What is evident in the forgoing is that missionaries found preaching difficult in foreign language to a people of another local language background and as a results, sought for the indigenous language of the people so as to communicate better with them. (P. 92).

The importance of language to human beings does not terminate in education alone. Politically speaking language enhances inter group relationship. Infact the crux of the political problem we have in Nigeria can be traced to language because a multilingual country cannot easily enjoy a singular and unifying approach to issues. This is because they express themselves in various tongues and languages. Generally speaking language enables us to learn, to think more clearly, to speak and write more effectively and to listen and read with great understanding.

Language can also help to persuade and control behaviour, transmit information create and express social cohesion etc.

The Nigerian Language Situation

Nigeria is a totally multilingual country. Hansford et al (1976) which represents the best most

documented compilation of a list of Nigerian languages now contains 394 entries approximates 400. As a result of her colonial heritage, English has played a very important role in the life of the nation. Throughout most of the colonial period between 1842 and 1959, Nigeria's formal education was patterned after the English system. The emphasis was on "English" both in thought and culture as according to Fafunwa (1989:5) the aim of Western Education was mainly to alienate the African man from his culture for the benefit of the then colonial masters.

Indeed, an illiterate who could speak English was considered educated even if he could not read or write; whereas a well cultured Igbo, Hausa or Yoruba who could only read or write in his mother tongue was considered as an "illiterate". The then management of education and the early missionaries discouraged and indeed kept Nigeria's cultural and linguistic activities out of the school system. In place of these, English was promoted in all its ramifications. Emenyeonu (1995:2) rightly observed that not to be vibrantly brilliant in its usage, was a mark of intellectual underdevelopment.

In fact, in the era that is being described, which is not too long ago, the Nigeria child was not considered to have made it at the end of his school tenure be it primary or secondary, if he did not shine in the English Language. More often than not failure in the English language at the end of the secondary school spelt irreversible doom for the individual.

This was the language situation in Nigeria before independence in 1960, when Nigerians gradually began to re-examine their role in world community of nations- Hence, the Nigerian government and its people came to regard education as the key to the overall development of the nation. This led to the promulgation of the National Policy on Education (NPE) the first edition of which was published in 1977. It was an outcome of series of processes which started with a National Curriculum Conference in 1969, followed by seminars and curriculum workshops between 1972 and 1976. The policy is a major advance in educational language planning in that, for the first time, the policy comes to grips with the multilingual situation and the problem of language choice in education.

What is Enlightenment?

Because it is what is passed across to you in the form of information that brings about enlightenment, its necessary for us in this paper to briefly define information. Lester Gilbert (2000) in his *Advanced Information and Communication Technology* sees information as any potentially useful fact, quantity or value that can be expressed uniquely with exactness or whatever is capable of causing a human mind to change its opinion about the current state of the real world. These two attempts at definition may appear to conflict, but actually they support each other.

We say so because it is only a potentially useful fact that is capable of causing a human mind to change it opinions.

On the other hand *Longman Dictionary of contemporary English* sees Enlightenment as the state of understanding something clearly or the act of making someone understand something clearly. So far we can see that there is no remarkable difference between getting informed and getting enlightened. It can rather be seen as two sides of the same coin.

What is then the Importance of Enlightenment?

From enlightenment the youths can be encouraged to build up sound morals for themselves in particular and for the society at large.

It educates an individual making for a sound mind in a sound body.

It promotes good and healthy living for example if the students take advice on how to live an HIV/AIDS free life as well as the danger of cigarette smoking, their good health has been promoted.

Enlightenment can curb juvenile delinquencies, for example if students listen to various enlightenment programmes organized by various bodies in their school, they will end up achieving and ascending to greatest heights instead of dropping out of school due to lack of information and become a problem to the home in particular and the society at large.

It serves to decry social ills like robbery, prostitution, smuggling, drug addiction, terrorism, impersonation, arson, rape, riot, bloodshed, ritual murder, confrontation which may or may not involve vandalization of property and other vices to mention a few. All the above mentioned ills of the society brings discomfort and anarchy and the only way to make sure that this situation does not arise is to get the students and villagers enlightened.

It also promotes the health consciousness of the masses through health discussion e.t.c.

Problems That May Militate Against Using Igbo Language for Enlightenment in Junior

Secondary Schools and Villages

- (1) The issue of accepted dialect is a problem in enlightening in Igbo Language because its only the owners of such dialect that benefit from such enlightenment programmes. Most of the issues we need to enlighten people on are topics that have their genesis in English language. It is to make sure that such information is brought to the grass root that makes it mandatory that M.T/Igbo language is used for the benefit of the masses. A situation where only the dialect owner benefit do not make for the achievement of the initial objective of getting all informed. The people that does not understand the dialect used might not take kindly to it. For example an Owerri man does not understand clearly what an Nsukka person or Ngwa person says. This brings us to the issue of standardized Igbo but even the standardization seems to favour the same indigenes more than other so there is still difficulty.
- (2) The next problem we need to x-ray is that of craze for English. The trend of things these days is for parents to fight and see that their children speak English language even from the womb if possible at the expense of their mother tongue (MT) or their ancestral language. A child who grew up in such environment where mother tongue is treated with negligence cannot benefit from enlightenment programme in Igbo Language.
- (3) Furthermore, the attitude of the Igbo are not encouraging. Most Igbos are ashamed of Igbo language instead of loving and using it. This is an aspect where the Yoruba can be scored distinction. A professor of medicine so long as he is a Yoruba man does not mind speaking it to anybody that he wants to communicate to joyously and proudly any where anytime but on the contrary an Igbo man who did not even see the four walls of the classroom forces himself to speak English whether its correct or not. In a situation like this therefore, enlightenment programme in Igbo will be treated with lack of interest and "I don care attitude".

Igbo linguists have been creating words through strategies like word coinages, loaning or borrowing. Nnadi and Ihebuzor (1993) looked at some of the problems of word coinages and showed that words coined are either long, clumsy, vague or often times imprecise. A problem that stems from this is that of end users like J.S.S. students and villagers not getting familiarized with these additions made in the language which will eventually make using them for enlightenment extremely difficult and useless.

We cannot even rule out the possibility of the personnel handling the enlightenment programmes being ignorant of the additions made in the language, what more using them.

Recommendations

- (i) Because the neglect of indigenous languages in schools and the emphasis on English is leading to a situation where many children no longer speak their mother tongue nor do they wish to identify with it and be enlightened with it, parents should encourage their children to learn mother tongue. They should endeavour to expose their children to the use of mother tongue as early as possible to enable them love it, appreciate it, understand it and use it. It does not make any sense to be among the owners of a language that you don't understand, appreciate or use.
- (ii) Adequate attention should be paid to the issue of competence of the personnel handling enlightenment programmes. They need to be trained in workshops to enable them stand the challenges of the job.
- (iii) Furthermore, there is pressing need to review the issue of dialect and standardization so that all can benefit from enlightenment programmes in Igbo Language.
- (iv) On the other hand, there should be attitudinal change on the part of Igbo, people the language owners themselves. They should develop love and acceptance for their language because it is the only language the Igbos are known with. May we also be reminded that it is only when we call a particular thing our own that it will truly be ours.
- (v) Finally there is need for Igbo linguists as well as the powers that be to find a convenient channel through which new coinages and borrowed words can be got across to end users. Efforts should be made to see that dictionaries, encyclopedias in Igbo language as well as other useful academic additions are properly circulated. For a maximum enlightenment programme to be successful and the necessary objectives achieved, all hands must be on deck.

Conclusion

I have endeavoured to highlight the problems that may militate against using Igbo Language for enlightenment in Junior Secondary Schools and villages. From the discussion so far the need to get information across to the public is very vital. Advertising we know is the most viable way of getting these information across. It is therefore strongly suggested that because of the increasing rate of problems and crime, and to enable it serve its purpose, Advertising agencies should make sure that experts in particular languages only can advertise in them. Advertising agencies should also encourage versatility by allowing their staff to take courses in dialectology to enhance their efficiency. Finally nobody should sit on the fence.

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