

Igbo Dialects Constraints in Indigenous Languages Education in Nigeria: A Case Study of Public Secondary Schools in Imo State Nigeria

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Abstract:

Since the end of the Nigeria Civil War, Igbo studies have improved in the primary and secondary schools. This was boosted when the National Policy on Education (1977, revised 1981, 1998, and 2004) provided that all mother tongues including Igbo should be taught as core subjects in primary and secondary schools. However, the post civil war period has also witnessed some developments which have impacted negatively on the above provision and even though there seems to be increasing awareness of the relevance of mother tongue, the extent to which this has been realized in indigenous language education has not been appreciated. In this study, Igbo language teachers/students selected from 10 secondary schools across Imo state South- East Nigeria were used to access the impact of Igbo dialects constraints on the use of language in mother tongue education. The result shows that, dialect differences and controversy surrounding orthography and standardization are impacting negatively on the realization of mother tongue education in the state.

Keywords: Indigenous Languages, Dialect constraints, Languages Policy, Orthography and standardization.

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Introduction

The role and relevance of mother tongue in education has been established as the best medium of instruction. The Ife six project by Fafunwa in 1986 is a typical example.

However, negative attitude has been a major obstacle towards the adoption and realization of mother tongue education in Igbo Language area. In most cases, this is as a result of the preference of a more socially relevant second language(s). This could be viewed as negative attitude emanating from external factors.

Hence, despite the seeming awareness of the relevance of mother tongue education among Igbo speakers, the extent to which this has been realized calls for retrospective investigation.

It has been discovered that apart from external-oriented negative factor of preference of socially relevant language one internal factor that is hampering the study of Igbo language is the issue of dialects dilemma. This stems from the standardization and orthography controversy surrounding the use of the language in the academic circle. Though the controversy tends to have been solved its impact led to the negligence and abandon attitude towards the standard variety.

In Nigeria, many linguists and languages teachers have also identified negative attitude of native speakers as one of the factors hindering the proper use and development of most of our indigenous languages. Sheba (1991p.206) states that “except for some literate parents, only few would want their children to be taught school subjects in Yoruba language.” This is also the case with Hausa, Ibibio, Edo and Igbo until recently. In fact, Maduka in (Ejele,2004p.17) had painted a very gloomy case of negative attitude of the Igbos towards their language.

Ohiri-Aniche (2008p.15-38) reports that in Imo state, 7% of the children age six years to eleven years and 9% of them age five years and below do not speak Igbo. The corresponding figures for Igbo resident in Lagos are 35% and 52.5% respectively. In addition, 50% of parents in Imo state and 80% in Lagos state speak mostly English or a mixture of English and Igbo with their children. The implication of all this is that when the children themselves become parents they will not be able to bring up their own children to speak Igbo. Thus, within two to three generations (between 50-75 years) the Igbo language would have become extinct.

Statement of the Problem

According to Uwalaka (2001), of all the languages of Nigeria, Igbo seems to manifest the greatest dialects dilemma. According to Nlem (2014), there are three major contributors to Igbo dialects dilemma, including, the missionaries, foreign scholars and Igbo linguists. These contributions have had negative impact on the study of Igbo language in the primary and Secondary Schools. There are conflicting interest in curriculum for the teaching and learning of language as a result of the dilemma which affects the standard variety. The standard Igbo variety is that which every speaker understands.

It is the variety that is used for teaching in schools. It is always accessible to the educated Igbo speakers.

The Overview of Igbo Standard Variety

According to Emenanjo (2013 p.9-10) ‘the standard variety of any language is an ideal required to communicate across dialects. Because it is an ideal, it will have different realizations, conditioned by factors, like the dialect or idiolect of user(s), subject of discourse. Standard Igbo is a neo-dialect with meta-language. It is watered, propagated and perpetuated by all canons of language engineering seen in verifiable and quantifiable features like graphization, codification, modernization, standard, corpus development and meta-language for the sciences, technology, legislative usage, education, language and literature’.

On the account of all these features, therefore, standard Igbo has acquired the property of intellectualization; that is, ability of the dialect to be used to express the most abstract and most modern notions of science technology, philosophy, and discourse in the legislative practice, education linguistics and literature.

The school system, textbooks and public examination are standardizing agencies of written language all over the world. Despite all the above attributes of the standard Igbo variety, the attitude towards it is negative and superfluous from its speakers. The attitude of teachers who engage in teaching profession in selected schools in Imo state and students consulted further buttress the fact that the standard Igbo variety is facing serious dilemma in the school system

Methodology

The study made use of the survey question as the major instrument and an observation guide as research technique. The questionnaire is devised by the problem of the investigation.

Validation

The survey questionnaire was validated by the teachers of Igbo language in terms of form, content and readability of item before it was tried among secondary school students.

Procedure

The researchers conducted the investigation and administered the questionnaires among intended respondents. There was a 100 percent turnout of accomplished survey instruments from teachers and students that responded to the questionnaire.

Population

The target population is the Igbo native speakers in Imo State, South Eastern Nigeria. The stratified random sampling technique is adopted to select the population for the study among ten Secondary Schools including teachers and students.

Respondents Of The Study

Table 1: Distribution of schools

School	Teachers	Students	Total
Holy Ghost College, Owerri	2	8	10
Owerri Girls Secondary School, Owerri	2	8	10
Government Secondary School Owerri	2	8	10
Emmanuel College Owerri	2	8	10
Akwakuma Girls Secondary School	2	8	10
Egbu Girls Secondary school	2	8	10
Comprehensive Secondary School Avu	2	8	10
Obazu Girls SecondarySchool Mbieri	2	8	10
Ara Secondary School, Umuguma	2	8	10
Army Day Secondary School Obinze	2	8	10
Total	20	80	100

Table I above shows that there were 20 teachers and 80 students that formed a total of 100 respondents across the selected secondary schools in the investigation.

Presentation and interpretation of data

This section presents and interprets data gathered from 100 respondents across the selected secondary schools in Imo State. The data were presented in tabular form and interpreted following the sequence of the specific problems raised in the study.

- (i.) **Are you aware of the National Policy on Education (NPE) and its Language requirements?**

Table 1

Repondents	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Students	No	80	80%
Teachers	No	20	20%
Total		100	100%

The responses in table 1 reveals a complete ignorance by both teachers and students of the language provision of the National Policy on Education.

The National Policy on Education (NPE), (1977) revised 1981, 1998,2004 stipulates that all mother-tongues, including Igbo, should be taught as core subjects in Primary and Secondary Schools.

This to the researchers is a big challenge to the government and other stakeholders for the failure to intimate and familiarize teachers and students alike about the implication of the Policy/Language requirements of the learning and teaching of Igbo language. We believe that, if the awareness is there, the knowledge and the will among students and teachers will be the driving force towards a positive attitude on the language.

(ii.) **When do you start learning Igbo in School**

Table 2

School Year	Frequency	Percentage
JSS I - JSS3	10	20%
SSS1- SSS 3	40	40.5%
JSS I – SSS3	30	30.5
Total	80	100%

Our result divides the schools into three. In the first group, the study of Igbo representing 20% of the respondents, starts from JSS1 and stops at JSS3. The second group representing 40.5% , introduces the study of the language from SS1 to SS3, while the last group representing 30.5% introduces Igbo language learning at the beginning of JSS1 through SS3.

This shows non- conformity to the indigenous language teaching requirement of NPE. Consequently, there is lack of uniformity regarding the appropriate time and level at which the study of Igbo should commence and the extent to which it should be sustained.

(iii.) **The extent to which students are exposed to Igbo language study in school.**

Table 3

Language	Time-table teaching periods	
	Frequency	Percentage
Igbo	4 Periods per week	9% of the total learning periods
English	12 periods per week	25% of the total learning periods

From the result in table 3 in most cases, only 4 periods representing 9% of the total learning periods are being allocated per week to the study of Igbo language in the secondary schools.

On the other hand, a minimum of 12 periods presenting 25% of the total learning periods are for English language per week. This is despite the fact that English is largely the medium of instruction, except, Some cases with few teachers who teach in vernacular. This poses serious threat to the realization of the use of Igbo Language in education.

The medium of instruction plays an important role in the development of attitudes, values and language skills of a student. The daily exposure to English language which familiarize students with the various aspect of the language contribute in no small way to the negative attitude to Igbo language which add no value since it does not attract any benefit to its speakers.

Table 3 also reveals the fact that the student respondents were not exposed to Igbo language teaching and learning, as much as they were to English language at the same time.

The response in table 3 shows different stages depending on the school at which Igbo Language is introduced. Most schools do not start the teaching and learning of Igbo until later part of students' academic lives at the senior secondary level.

(iv.) **Which of languages is the medium of institution**

Table 4

Language	Frequency	Percentage
Igbo	20	20%
English	80	100%
Pidgin	-	-
Total	100	100%

The responses to the question indicate that English is the major language of instruction at all levels of the secondary school education. The use of Igbo Language as indicated by respondents; firstly, Igbo language is only used as medium of instruction during the teaching and the learning of Igbo language. Secondly, there are some teachers in some of the schools who indulge in code-mixing of Igbo when teaching some subjects with English. This is an idiosyncratic feature rather than a policy-motivated practice that is not common to all the Igbo teachers.

(v.) **Factors responsible for the negative attitude towards the use of Igbo Language in mother tongue education.**

Table 5

Factors	Frequency	Percentage
Dialects Diversity	80	80%
Non implementation of the language policy statement in the NPE	60	60%
Official function or role of English	100	100%
Lack of trained Igbo language teachers	100	100%

The respondents recognized all the factors in table 5 as playing effective roles in generating negative attitude in the use of Igbo in mother tongue education. 80 respondent representing 80 % opined that the dialect constraint rocking the Igbo language is a serious impediment on its role in mother education. Some Igbo writers in Aka weta and Ume (1982) and Okponku Abu employed different dialects other than the standard Igbo variety.

According to Emenajo (2013 p.10) some degree of competence in writing or transcribing the dialects is expected in doing so in their dialects. Writing in dialects promotes graphalects over the standard orthography. This is a serious problem in the Igbo in mother tongue education. How would teachers and students cope with the situation? A situation where a student is taught in a given Igbo dialect in preparation for an Igbo exam in the standard variety is an aberration. Our discovery shows code-mixing involving the standard Igbo variety and the dialect of the given Igbo teacher in all the schools visited.

Dictionaries in the language come in different dialects with varying meanings. There is urgent need to facilities harmony Igbo writers to respect and adopt the standard variety in their works.

The respondents blamed the challenges militating against the use of Igbo in Mother tongue education on the non-implementation of the language provision of NPE. The policy itself is problematic and one wonders how the Igbo language will thrive in an environment where English is the medium of instrument for all subjects except Igbo. If indigenous languages like Igbo is to be adopted, then it should be a gradual and planned policy process backed with the right political will. Unfortunately, what we have on ground does not encourage the use of Igbo in indigenous language education.

The major setback on the use to Igbo in mother tongue education is the function and role of English language in Nigeria. English is not just the language of education, it is also the lingua Franca, language of Government, administration and transaction. All these make the learning and acquisition of it an added value. Igbo though one of the major Nigeria languages does not play such roles and does not attract patronage from its learners.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this work, we recommend the following:

- That all the stakeholders in the promotion and development of Igbo language including the government, teachers, Linguists, non-governmental organizations, etc, should form a synergy for greater awareness among its members with respect to language provision in the NPE.
- Efforts should be made by the Ministry of Education in collaboration with Igbo Linguists to organize workshops/seminars for Igbo teachers at regular intervals to enhance their knowledge on the standard variety of the language and to review interferences coming from the local varieties.
- Efforts should be made to ensure that there is uniformity in the time for the commencement of teaching/learning of Igbo language in all the schools. A case where different schools choose different times to commence the teaching of Igbo in their schools does not make room for unified curriculum for Igbo language teaching.
- The use of Igbo in teaching and learning should be extended to other subjects other than Igbo language so that many students would begin to show interest in the language.
- There is need for regular training of Igbo teachers to keep them abreast with the knowledge and developments in the language.

Conclusion

The use of a given language in education enhances its rapid growth. However, that process is a systematic one that requires the training of languages teachers in the standard Igbo variety. It also requires the creation of the awareness and the implementation of the Nigeria Policy on Education, There Should be a kind of harmony among Igbo writers to avoid the use of dialects instead the standard Igbo variety. The mass media , especially television and radio should be used as agents to disseminate the needed information in the Igbo language areas. The study of Igbo language should be made compulsory from JSS1 till a student get to SS1.

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