

## **The Role of Indigenous Language in Teaching & Learning: An Appraisal of Igbo Language**

**BY**

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### **Abstract**

The use of language in the transmission of culture and cultural values of a people cannot be over emphasized. Language is a major means of identity. In a situation where a people face the threat of extinction of their language calls for immediate action. An appraisal of the state of the Igbo language, one of the major Nigerian languages is in focus here and the efforts of “Otu sụwakwa Igbo” (a society for the promotion of the speaking of the Igbo language) are reviewed. Language acquisition starts from birth and where this is neglected, the child loses focus; the problem of the Igbo child of today. A review of related literature was made and a survey method was used to collect data. Here structured questionnaires were constructed for those who are literate in Igbo language while oral interviews using the same questionnaires were used for illiterate ones. Responses were tape recorded and analyzed. It was found out that this group is one of the numerous groups in the business of promoting Igbo language and culture. Despite their efforts, the Igbo language still faces numerous problem and suggested solutions to these problems form the last part of this paper. If nothing is done to salvage this language, all the rich cultural heritage of a people will be lost.

## **Introduction:**

Language is an arbitrary oral symbol by which social community interacts, communicates and expresses its ideas and values. In Nigeria; over 450 distinct tribes form the entire population. These ethnic groups have languages that distinguish them from another, thus making Nigeria a multilingual nation. Their different languages also form the basis of their uniqueness.

Recently, most indigenous or tribal languages in Nigeria are facing threat of extinction. The contact between Europeans and Nigerians brought about bilingualism – the use of more than one language in a single society. Initially, this seemed a welcomed development but as time goes on, its effect in indigenous Nigerian languages is evident. Most of these native languages are on the brink of collapse.

The foreign language (English language) is the official language in Nigeria. The position given to it; forces the natives to always speak English language, even in the absence of foreigner. The loss of the indigenous language amounts to loss of identity and the people's cultural heritage. As such, this awareness needs to be created in the minds of the native speakers.

In Igbo land in Nigeria, Igbo language is one of the major indigenous languages. The speakers are gradually abandoning their God-given mother-tongue for the English language, during unofficial period and even in their private business with fellow Igbo. They need to know that their *Lingua Franca* should not take position of their native language in their homes. English language is a complimentary language to Igbo language.

Therefore, speakers of Igbo language should not allow it to go into extinction. This should be done by learning and teaching the Igbo child, the Igbo language. This is because, language acquisition starts from cradle. If it is not properly

acquired or learnt, the implication is that Igbo race will at a time produce Igbo extraction without Igbo language and this is an anomaly and calls for urgent redress.

### **Language Acquisition and its implication**

One of the greatest achievement of human beings stem from their ability to speak and entertain complex thoughts and to communicate them. Whatever that is done in life is conceived of as “the language spoken”

Children must master their language in order to be useful in their environment. Atkinson, Atkinson, Smith, Bem, and Hilgard (1990:337) agreed with this assertion when they wrote thus:

....they must master all levels of language – not only the proper speech sounds, but also how these sounds are combined into thousands of words and how these words can be combined into sentences to express thoughts. It is a wonder that virtually all children in all cultures accomplish so much of this in a mere 4 to 5 years. What is perhaps even more amazing is that all children, regardless of their culture, seem to go through the same sequence of development...

The above statement implies that all children born are by nature mandated to acquire language. This language has to be importantly native before other languages for interaction.

Children acquire the three levels of language. It starts at the level of phonemes to the level of words and other morphemes and finally to the level of sentence units, or syntax. As these processes goes on, the child graduates from primitive words or sentences to complex words or sentence. The children

learn language by imitating adults. As such, the child's way of thinking or behavior is influenced by the much language acquired and learned in his environment.

In order for an indigenous language to thrive, each new generation must acquire the language. Consequently, a language can virtually go extinct if one generation fails to learn it. Therefore, every language group must have a plan for transmitting the language from one generation to the next. This virtually should occur in the home or in a combination of other places. This will not happen without intensified effort because the languages of the colonizers tend to dominate and often must be learned in order for young people to become educated and find employment.

### **Igbo Language today:**

Before the advent of British imperialism, Igbo language is the only language of communication amongst the native speakers. Time was when it was a thing of pride and gusto to speak Igbo language even amongst the neighbours of the Igbo. As a result of Western Education, by the British administration; the speaking of Igbo language shifted gradually to English language.

Currently, Igbo people hardly speak their language fluently without adulterating it with English Language. In the traditional Igbo society, learning was through informal education; the language used was Igbo. Love, respect, good morals were the order of the day. Ethics, norms and taboos of the society were highly observed.

Today, we live in an era driven by technology such as computers and other scientific machines. Science and technology therefore is being given priority attention by the government at all levels. The study of Igbo language and other seemingly arts subjects are not funded. It becomes a big challenge to the natives to inculcate the habit of speaking,

writing and reading of Igbo language in their young ones. The weight of the indigenous language is now very light.

Communication in Igbo homes are done mainly in English now. The reason is that higher status functions are limited to English (powerful) language. When someone speaks Igbo even amongst its members; may be in schools, churches, or markets, he or she is looked at with disdain. This is a very unhealthy situation. For a language to survive, it must be used for a wide range of functions otherwise it begins to wither and die.

In schools, authorities do not allow students of Igbo extraction to speak Igbo language. This ban automatically makes it difficult for young ones to interact friendly with their fellow Igbo. Maduagwu (2008:6) has lamented on the gradual extinction of the Igbo language, urging the people and governments of the South-east states of Nigeria to rise to the challenge of protecting the Igbo language.

Aniche (2008:14) discovered that over the years, parents do not consciously ask children to reply in Igbo when asked questions, it affected their fluency in speaking the language thus dwindling their interest on the Igbo language. Ezife (2008:16) is equally worried about the dying situation of Igbo language. He complained about the attitudes of some of the Igbo in higher positions when their fellow Igbo visits them.

... I get amazed at times at the actions of some of our brothers who by all standards form the pillar of leadership of Ndigbo. Some are in positions of authority in this country and when their brothers visit them, they prefer speaking English Language. Where does this kind of attitude lead us? We the eyes of Ndigbo should first appreciate our language before others and instill that discipline and love for

our language so that we shall be acceptable in the society...

This expression shows the degree of the fallen state of Igbo language and calls for urgent revival.

In the ‘film industry’ (the Nollywood) most of the actors and actresses are of Igbo extraction yet all the films are produced in English language with their themes plots and setting from Igbo life or world view. This is ridiculous as it does not help in the growth of Igbo language and culture. Even in academics, Igbo scholars find it difficult to write articles in Igbo language.

Recently, globalization has affected the life of the Igbo people that even their language sounds archaic to them.

### **“Otu Sụwakwa Igbo” and its efforts**

“Otu Sụwakwa Igbo” is one of the crusaders of Igbo language revival. It is a society in the business of promoting the speaking of the Igbo language. This group has existed for over 9 years now; it started from Anambra State by Pita Ejiofor. The group created awareness in Anambra particularly and Igbo land in general on the threat of extinction of Igbo language. As its activities were yielding positive results, the group extended its arms to Imo State in 2007.

Increasing participants’ understanding of language issues across the Igbo homeland, identifying challenges to Igbo language preservations and developing policy recommendations for individuals’ communities and governments to facilitate continued use of the Igbo language comprised the heart of the group’s objectives.

Their first accomplishment was to force Imo State Ahiajoku (an annual lecture on Igbo values) to be delivered in Igbo. The group has held several conferences in 2009 up till date. Their various themes include:

- i. The problem of extinction of Igbo language, real or imaginary (2009)
- ii. Igbo teachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (2019) challenges prospects
- iii. Igbo language and music (2011)

The conferences held brought together over 500 diverse Igbo delegates – artists, students, leaders; Elders and teachers to discuss the language issues concerning Igbo today. In turn, delegates vigorously pursued these objectives by delivering researched presentations, consulting with elders, listening to speeches by guest language policy and planning specialists and above all, facilitated, focused dialogue between the members of “otu Sụwakwa Igbo” and participants.

“Otu Sụwakwa Igbo” has created awareness in radio and television programs and people are now aware of the dangers ahead concerning Igbo language. Also the group’s alert concerning the threat of extinction has made it possible for some universities in the Eastern part of Nigeria like Federal University of Technology, Owerri, Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri to include Igbo language in their General studies unit. More universities and colleges of education are making plans to include Igbo language in their General Studies Unit.

The efforts of “Out Sụwakwa Igbo” signify the start of a vigorous and progressive understanding of the importance of the Igbo language amongst the speakers especially the young ones.

Nevertheless, many are yet to adhere to this clarion call by the group. Many young people are growing up without hearing their language spoken at home. Many are eager to learn their language but do not have enough opportunities to do so. This is because parents are interested in teaching their children to speak Igbo language. They prefer to speak English even at home.

### **Prospects of “Otu Sụwakwa Igbo”**

As the group uses its muscle, one of the first priorities must be to ensure that young people have real opportunities to learn the Igbo language at all the stages of their schooling – Nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary.

The group is also proposing new measures that will encourage the use of Igbo language by companies doing business in Igbo land.

The “Otu Sụwakwa Igbo” is also in the business of promoting Igbo programmes in radio and television stations in Igbo land. That is to say that more creative production in the Igbo language will be available on air.

Furthermore, the “Otu Sụwakwa Igbo” amidst every other thing will maintain Igbo language where it is strong; revitalize it in places where shift has taken place. For example; Diasporas are encouraged to speak Igbo language in their home.

The society will continually hold workshops and conferences annually with elders, educators and students.

The “Otu Sụwakwa Igbo” is also in the business of enhancing children to use the remaining time with elders and learn their language, stories and ways.

### **Recommendations**

Igbo language is a language that can be spoken anywhere, in any situation provided that we take on the task with creativity and determination. As such efforts should be intensified in the following ways to promote and preserve Igbo language.

- i) Parents should take responsibility as the primary teachers of their own children in all aspects of Igbo culture and language.
- ii) Children should learn Igbo language before they learn English Language. Their early schooling



- should be in their mother tongue as stipulated in the language policy.
- iii) Inviting elders as regular visitor in schools to address students in Igbo language so as to encourage the students to speak like the elders in return.
  - iv) All Igbo children should have access and opportunities to learn Igbo language in schools whether they are living in Igbo land or not.
  - v) Make the Igbo language a mandatory secondary and tertiary school subject for all living in Igbo land.
  - vi) Provide opportunities for Igbo and non-Igbo to learn about Igbo language, culture and history.
  - vii) Develop exchange programmes for Igbo children to go and stay in a community where the Igbo language is spoken without adulteration in order to learn the standard Igbo language or a new Igbo dialect.
  - viii) Provide job opportunities for Igbo graduates so as to encourage more people to study Igbo language in the university Igbo youths should pursue partnerships at multiple levels in order to achieve their language goals.
  - ix) Foster positive attitudes in the population that subjects such as Maths and Sciences can also be taught in Igbo language.
  - x) Pressure should be mounted on the governments to fund all initiatives that are in the business of promoting Igbo language.
  - xi) The activities that promote Igbo language must be fun and cool
  - xii) Pride in the Igbo language, culture and identity should be promoted within the Igbo language policy.

- xiii) Celebrate Igbo language week across border with activities and promotions. That is talking every opportunity to celebrate Igbo language.
- xiv) Produce a documentary about Igbo across the Igbo land to educate others.
- xv) The Igbo youths should make special commitment to learn Igbo language in their dialect fluently.
- xvi) Use Igbo language to label things in the homes, stores, schools, shops, and in the churches.

### **Conclusion:**

The importance of indigenous language on the native speakers cannot be stressed beyond bounds. Igbo language as an indigenous language is the number one basis of identifying the people. Modern practices and their impact on the natives should not be allowed to erode the culture of the people especially their language. The efforts of Otu Suwakwa Igbo are imperative to this ill wind – indigenous language threat of extinction. The group has the mandate to make Igbo know that; their language is the most veritable communication strategy and weapon of the native speakers amongst themselves. The device with which to create, aspire, desire, feel, and express the wisdom of the people which form part of their culture.

Igbo youths should extend their desire to reconnect with Igbo language. Parents should as well develop a communication strategy in Igbo language (folktale) which will enable children grow deep in using the language. Survival of the language is a precedent to the people's survival.

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