

Challenges of Teaching and Learning the Igbo Language at Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study identifies and describes the problems of teaching and learning of the Igbo language at Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Nigeria. In the last two decades, it has been observed that there has been a substantial decrease in the proportion of students who applied for or even enrolled to study the Igbo language at university level in Nigeria. Using survey design, this study investigated the problems associated with the teaching and learning of the Igbo language. Fifteen Igbo language students and four Igbo language lecturers at Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam campus were used to obtain information. Two instruments were administered on participants selected for the study. Results indicate that lack of Igbo pedagogical materials, attitude of people towards the language among other things prevent the smooth teaching and learning of the Igbo language. The paper concludes that although efforts are made by scholars to revitalize and popularize the study of Igbo language, interest and enrolment among prospective students are still very low.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is an indispensable tool for communication, transmission of culture and socialization. The Igbo language is one of the major languages spoken in Nigeria with a population of 20 million speakers (Udoe, 2018). Most definitions of the name 'Igbo' often collectively referred to the land, language and the ethnic people of Nigeria who occupy the South Eastern part of Nigeria. Five states make up the Igbo speaking states namely: Enugu, Abia, Imo, Anambra, Ebonyi and some parts of Rivers and Delta states (Udoe, 2018). The language is also a medium of instruction in government owned primary schools in Anambra state. The use of indigenous language for effective teaching and learning cannot be overemphasized. Ezeani (2001) opines that the use of indigenous language in teaching science subjects will help students to understand and perform well in science subjects. Similarly, Mkandawire (2017) observes that Zambian school children participate actively in class when Cinyanja; a language spoken in town and cities is used by teachers than when the English language is used in teaching.

Many efforts have been made by Igbo scholars to ensure that the language is standardized in order to compete with other languages of the world. The history of standardizing the Igbo language will not be complete without mentioning the Onwu orthography controversy. Later on, Dr Ogbalu, a popularizer of

the language and Igbo linguists such as: Emenanjo, Nwadike and others helped in promoting the language. Furthermore, Ogbalu introduced the Society for the Promotion of Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC) to ensure that the language could be used in all areas of life. It is pertinent to note that SPILC died a natural death after the demise of Ogbalu in the 90s. In recent times, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Advisory Committee on Language Pluralism and Multi-language Education opines that the Igbo language will be subsumed by other stronger Nigerian languages by 2025, in essence, the Igbo language will soon become extinct. The prediction by UNESCO further propelled many Igbo scholars and popularizers to swing into action in order to find out ways of preventing the Igbo language from dying. Credit must be given to Professor Pita Ejiofor for assuming the position of Ogbalu, as a popularizer of the language. What motivated the researcher to carry out this research work is the report by UNESCO about the state of the Igbo language. The researcher wants to find out reasons why the Igbo language is about to become extinct by studying the problems of teaching and learning the Igbo language at Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University (henceforth, COOU), Nigeria.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for the study is Crystal's (2002) work on Levels of Language Endangerment. Crystal (2002) believes that figures and statistics are not reliable instruments for measuring language endangerment rather the rate of acquisition by children, attitude of the speakers and the effect of contact are the most reliable instruments for measuring language endangerment. Crystal further classified the levels of endangerment into five stages such as: viable language, viable but small language, endangered and nearly extinct language, safe and not safe language. The Igbo language belongs to the endangered language category as stipulated by UNESCO. Are (2015) opines that preserving languages from dying is important because languages contain the culture, history and identity of a people. The theory is therefore relevant to the present study because through its application, it is possible to discover the factors that cause language endangerment.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of studies on Igbo language. Ezeani (2001) studies learning sciences in Igbo language. He discovers that science subjects can be taught in Igbo language because the language has no linguistic deficiency. He exemplified his claim with some concepts such as: *Carbondioxide: kabo; metre: mita; force: ike*. Ezeani maintains that low academic achievement of students in science subjects is associated with learning science subjects in English. While Ezeani looks at learning sciences using the Igbo language, the present study is interested in the problems of teaching and learning the Igbo language at Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam campus.

Umo (2013) examines Igbo language and identity. She discovers that pedagogical problems, tone, orthography and diacritic problems are some of the issues that stall the effective teaching and learning of the Igbo language. Her work provides insight into the problems of teaching and learning the Igbo language in general. However, the work by Umo is different from the present study while the former looks at the problems of the Igbo language in general the latter is interested in the problems of teaching and learning the Igbo language at COOU.

Okudo (2013) examines the problems and prospects of teaching and learning the Igbo language in secondary schools in Lagos state. She observes that inadequate Igbo language texts, lack of language laboratories for teaching of the language and poor method of instruction are the factors that hinder

effective teaching and learning of the language. Okudo (2013) examined the problems of teaching and learning the Igbo language in secondary schools in Lagos using constructivism theory while, this study considers the problems of teaching Igbo at COOU using Crystal's levels of language endangerment model.

Similarly, Onwuka (2009) explores the factors that affect students' performance in Igbo language Senior School Certificate Examinations (SSCE). She discovers that lack of teachers, poor attitude of students, parents and the general public towards Igbo and lack of teaching aids are major impediments for effective teaching and learning of the Igbo language in Aboh, Mbaise Local Government Area of Imo state. The work is similar to the present study and offers insights into the problems of the Igbo language in general. However, while the work is based on secondary schools in Aboh, Mbaise, the present researcher considers the problems of teaching and learning the Igbo language at COOU.

4. METHODOLOGY

The researcher used two instruments for data collection. They are: interview and participatory observation protocol. The two techniques were adopted because the researcher is a native speaker and member of staff of COOU. Furthermore, the researcher was able to unravel certain problems through oral interview. The population of the study is made up of 4 lecturers out of the 8 lecturers in the department and 15 students out of 48 students in the department.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Despite the fact that the Igbo language is the mother tongue of the people, it is also an effective tool for easy perception, comprehension, and creative expression needed for nurturing a child's mental and emotional being. Unfortunately, the Igbo language has problems and is even at the verge of becoming extinct. Some of the problems of teaching and learning the Igbo language are:

5.1. LACK OF LANGUAGE LABORATORY

Pronunciation problems emerge mainly from lack of language laboratory. The language laboratory enhances students' performance. It is a vital tool for teaching vocabulary, grammar and listening comprehension. The language laboratory is an audio-media which is important in the teaching of the Igbo language. It involves listening to voice and imitating the voice. Unfortunately, at COOU, Igbo language department does not have a language laboratory. Ajisafe and Okotie (2011) observe that many

secondary schools and universities in Nigeria do not have language laboratories because of the general notion that laboratories are not for Art subjects but for science subjects. But they forget that language laboratory is essential to the Phonetics teacher who teaches the sounds of the language.

5.2 LACK OF LINGUISTICS TEXTBOOKS WRITTEN IN IGBO

Linguistics textbooks on Morphology, Syntax and Semantics written in Igbo are not available. Hence, Igbo language lecturers use Linguistics textbooks written in English to teach Igbo language students in an Igbo language class. This is a great factor that militates against effective teaching and learning of the Igbo language. Umo (2013) laments that the greatest problem facing the teaching and learning of the Igbo language is lack of textbooks written in Igbo for Igbo learners. For effective teaching and learning to take place, adequate instructional materials should be made available. Unfortunately, the Igbo language does not have enough textbooks. Even though some Igbo language scholars are writing books, most of their books are on literature and culture and not on the grammar, syntax, semantics, discourse analysis or lexicology of the language.

5.3 POOR ATTITUDE OF STUDENTS TOWARDS THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF THE IGBO LANGUAGE

Most Igbo language students have negative attitude towards the Igbo language, (Onwuka, 2009) and this attitude has affected their value system. Chidi-Ehiem & Ogbu (2017) observe that students cultivate the nonchalant attitude towards learning the Igbo language at secondary school level. Onwuka (2009) further observes that elderly native speakers of the language are responsible for the negative attitude of students towards the language because of their uncomplimentary remarks about the language. These comments influence their children negatively hence, they do not have any regard for their mother tongue. Fabumi & Salawu (2005) observe that the attitude of Yoruba elites towards the language is not encouraging. The elites prefer their children to speak the English language because it has political relevance. Similarly, Tawallbeh, Dagamseh & Al-Matrafi (2013) observe that the reason for people's poor attitude towards their language is because they feel that their language has no economic prospects. At COOU, students have poor attitude towards the language considering the number of registered students in the department as shown below:

Number of Registered Students in Faculty of Arts for 2018/2019 Academic Session

S/N	Department	Number of Students
1	English	381
2	Religion	75
3	Philosophy	422
4	Igbo	48

The table above shows that Igbo language department has the lowest number of students while, Philosophy department has the highest number of registered students. It is therefore obvious that the language is gradually dying. The low number of Igbo language undergraduate students is associated with poor attitude of people towards the teaching and learning of the language. Umo (2013) observes that people ridicule Igbo language students. COOU students told the researcher that they refer to their department as Linguistics department rather than Igbo department to avoid being mocked by other students. Some students agree that the course does not open doors for economic empowerment as can be seen with the study of English and even Chinese which they consider as international languages hence, the reason for low enrolment of students in Igbo department.

5.4 POOR BACKGROUND IN IGBO LANGUAGE BY STUDENTS AT SECONDARY SCHOOL

Many students were not properly taught the Igbo language at secondary school level and when they become Igbo language students, they find it difficult to write in Igbo language particularly in the use of diacritic marks. This is in line with Onwuka (2009) observation that teachers in secondary schools only prepare students during external examinations such as SSCE which is why students are not well grounded in the Igbo language at secondary school level.

5.5 INCONSISTENCIES IN WRITING IGBO WORDS

Igbo orthography controversy still militates against the development of the Igbo language up till this moment. Some scholars advocate that Igbo words should be written together while others advocate that it should be separated such as; *n'ihena* or *n' ihena*. This is a major problem in teaching the Igbo language

5.6 TERMINOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

Many terms are springing up daily and the language does not have real terms for such concepts. Such as Desktop, Iphone, and Ipad do not have Igbo equivalents hence, translation of such electronic digital devices from English to Igbo is a problem.

5.7 IGBO LANGUAGE DEPARTMENT SERVES AS A DUMPING GROUND FOR DEFICIENT STUDENTS

At COOU, most students in Igbo language department did not apply to study the Igbo language but at the point of registration, the students were found to be deficient in Mathematics and such students are sent to Igbo language department. This is the surest way of getting into the department. Hence, the department appears to be a dumping ground for deficient students and such students who do not have interest in studying the Igbo language will pose problems for the language teacher. Similarly, Fabumi & Salawu (2005) observe that few undergraduate students in Yoruba department were forced to study Yoruba because they could not be admitted to study other courses. However, such students eventually get admission to study other courses and end up abandoning the Yoruba language department.

5.8 UPDATING IGBO LANGUAGE DICTIONARIES

Although, many linguists and lexicographers are trying in the area of dictionary writing such as Echeruo (1997) and Igwe (1999), Anagbogu (2004) opines that Igwe's (1999) dictionary failed to adhere to the principles of lexicography hence, the reason for the enormous problems found in the way he handled Igbo major lexical categories. Without a good and standard Igbo language dictionary, effectiveness in the learning of the language by second language learners will be stalled. Dictionaries should be updated yearly the way English lexicographers update the English language dictionaries because, language is dynamic and it changes everyday hence the dictionary should capture the changes that take place in the language.

6. WAY FORWARD

- Entrance examinations should be taken by prospective Igbo language students before being admitted into the department. Mathematics should equally be made a compulsory subject like it is done in other departments for students to be eligible to study the Igbo language.
- Functional Language laboratory should be installed to facilitate effective teaching and learning of the Igbo language
- Government should provide jobs for Igbo language graduates. This will arouse the interest of the students in learning the language.

- Igbo language dictionaries should be updated in order to capture new concepts that are coming up every day.
- Scholars should agree on the best writing system to accept for writing the Igbo language. This will help the learners of the Igbo language.
- Linguistics textbooks should be translated into Igbo to enable lecturers to teach their students in the Igbo language thereby preserving and promoting the Igbo language.

7. CONCLUSION

The paper has shown that teaching the Igbo language at COOU is faced with a lot of problems. The problems emerged due to lack of language laboratory, terminological problems, attitude of students towards the language, poor background of students in Igbo language at secondary school level, among other reasons. The Igbo language has a long unique history; therefore, the language should be preserved so that it won't become extinct.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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