

CHALLENGES OF PROMOTING THE INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN NIGERIA: THE IGBO LANGUAGE TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

The indigenous language is one of the most basic and important tools of communication. It is a vehicle that drives culture of the people. The indigenous language and culture of the people are inseparable, this is because; it explains their world view, norms and values, it helps in the social, economic and technological advancement of a given society. It also serves as the binding force to the people, bringing them together in unity and leading to the sustainable growth and development of the people and the society generally. The indigenous language is a veritable tool for the promotion of unity, cultural identity, and national pride in the people. It can impact positive values in the people and facilitate national development and sustainability, hence the need to promote it. Unfortunately, the indigenous language has played a second fiddle role in Nigeria, thereby placing it at the position of total negligent which in turn has jeopardized all these roles it supposed to have played in the life of individuals and the society at large. Thus, there is need for the promotion of the indigenous languages in Nigeria. This paper focuses on challenges associated with promoting the indigenous language by the indigenous language teachers in Nigeria. The qualitative research approach involving extensive review of literatures on indigenous language was adopted. It outlines the challenges the indigenous language teacher encounters in the course of discharging his/her duties and suggests ways forward for sustainable promotion of the indigenous language.

Key words: Language, indigenous language, indigenous language teacher, challenges.

1. Introduction

The ability to communicate clearly is very paramount to people of all cultures, and language is central to communication and for the sustenance of culture. This is true because it is through language that the culture of a people is transmitted from one generation to another. Ude, Anyanwu and Osuagwu (2020:94) affirm that language is at the heart of culture and knowledge retention and is the vehicle through which the constituents of a people's culture are acquired, communicated, shared and transmitted from one generation to another. By this, it is obvious that language is a means through which our culture can be preserved. Language according to Emeka-Nwobia, Onu and Aja (2016:67) is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by which members of a given society cooperate and interact. It expresses their thought, artistry, values, indigenous knowledge and the essence of the people. Language is very important to man, because every human activities revolve around it (Emeka-Nwobia, 2007). She further states that there is no conceivable human activity where language is not used. In other words, language is a basic necessity of life, if education is a basic factor for development in any society, then language through which the education is passed to the people is as important as the education itself Benson, Anyalebechi and Ariole (2017:3).

Languages, whether indigenous or foreign, are indispensable tools in the life of individuals because there is no aspect of human activities that can be successful without the effective use of language (Ayodele, 2013). Language plays a great role in culture and societal development because we use language every day in many ways and to meet countless different needs which place language as an important tool in the society. Man needs language to share his ideas, experiences, emotions, and interact with other people in the society or in his environment (Ayeomoni, 2011 in Benson, Anyalebechi and Ariole, 2017). The repository of a people's identity and way of life is encapsulated in their culture as well as transferred to other people and newer

generations, via the means of language (Emeka-Nwobia, 2015). It is a phenomenon that fosters communication and enhances national development as it enables interactions for economic, educational, social, religious and political purposes (Benson, Okere & Nwauwa, 2016).

According to Ani (2012:110):

The appeal of language resides precisely in its capacity to meet the needs of man for self-expression and for communication of experience in his day-to-day engagements with the world around him. Man needs language for the dissection and analysis of material reality and spiritual experience as well as for formulation of hypothetical statements, theories and belief as well as value systems. In other words, beyond facilitating communication of experience, a language must enhance man's cognitive abilities and functioning, if it is to be of permanent relevance or survive through the ages.

The functional characteristics of language according to Emeka-Nwobia (2015) are not just limited to communication or transfer of information; it provides means of concealing information as well as unveiling hidden agendas and codes. To achieve this, the indigenous language of the people, which is the language acquired from birth must play a key role. "Linguistic diversity is being threatened around the world, and this threat is acutely felt by indigenous peoples. According to UNESCO, approximately 600 languages have disappeared in the last century and they continue to disappear at a rate of one language every two weeks. Up to 90 percent of the world's languages are likely to disappear before the end of this century if the current trends are allowed to continue" (UN, 2008). This is as result of negligent and disloyalty towards our language which when at the extreme breeds what Emeka-Nwobia (2016) calls "disuse". According to her most of our African languages are suffering from "disuse" by the owners of the language. Igbo elites for instance, see the speaking of Igbo as, old-fashioned, archaic, and obscure. The indigenous language is supposed to be learnt by children through their parents and elders, however, fewer and fewer children are learning indigenous languages from home from their parents and elders. Even when the parental generation speaks the indigenous language, they do not often pass it on to their children. In an increasing number of cases, indigenous languages are used only by elders (UN, 2008). Because of this, the children "thought pattern and deeds are often at variance with the values and beliefs of the society they claim to belong. This leaves them at a cross road, where they are neither here nor there, that is to say that most of them lack communicative competence in neither their mother tongue their "acquired" or second language. This is tantamount to their being the proverbial bat "usu" which is neither a land animal (mamma) nor a bird" Emeka-Nwobia (2016:67).

The domineering influence of foreign cultures on our national psyche has been a challenge on the Nigerian society. This, to a large extent, has resulted to lack of appreciation for our culture and its component parts, which includes our indigenous languages. The indigenous language as one of the most basic and important tool of communication, is a vehicle that drives culture of the people. The indigenous language and culture of the people are inseparable, this is because; it explains their world view, norms and values, it help in the social, economic and technological advancement of a given society. It also serve as the binding force to the people bringing them together in unity and leading to the sustainable growth and development of the people and the society generally (Ayakoroma, 2017).

The indigenous language is a veritable tool for the promotion of unity, cultural identity, and national pride in the people. It can impact positive values in the people and facilitate national development and sustainability, hence the need to promote it. Unfortunately, the indigenous language has played a second fiddle role in Nigeria, thereby placing it at the position of total neglect which in turn has jeopardized all these roles it supposed to have played in the life of individuals and the society at large. Thus, there is need for the promotion of the indigenous languages in Nigeria. This paper focuses on challenges associated with promoting the indigenous languages by the indigenous language teachers in Nigeria.

2. The indigenous language and their role in Nigeria

Indigenous language has been variously defined and has many important roles to play in the life of the speakers. According to Adedeji (2014), it is a language spoken, belonging or connected with a particular place or area which one is talking about or with the place where one lives. Indigenous language is that native or local language spoken by a tribe. The language would be from a linguistically distinct community that has been settled in the area for many generations (Jibir-Daura, 2014). The indigenous language is that language that has the potential of transmitting culture, norms values and beliefs of the people to the younger generation. Indigenous language refers to the various native languages spoken in Nigerian. They are languages that are aboriginal to the people (Adeniyi & Bello, 2006). Onu and Obianika (2019:39) maintain that an indigenous language is a language that is native to a region and spoken by indigenous people often reduced to the status of a minority language.

National Policy on Education (NPE, 1977) (revised 1981, 1998, 2004, 2007 and 2013) acknowledges the importance of the Nigerian indigenous languages in the education of the child. It states that the indigenous language or the language of the immediate environment of a child should be used to teach the child in the first three years of primary education. Afterwards, the child's indigenous language or the language of the immediate environment will be taught as a school subject throughout primary and secondary education. In line with the language policy of the NPE, the indigenous language of every Nigerian child is supposed to be the language of instruction of early primary education and a school subject from senior primary and all through secondary education. The policy statement acknowledges the importance of the indigenous language to the child as a potential adult whose duty it will be to transmit the components of the indigenous language to the next generation. Anyogo and Odey (2002) therefore, suggest that the English language should not continue to enjoy the high status and esteem it does today, since it is alien to us and foisted on us by the colonialists.

Adamu (2010) argues that all languages are a work in progress but the globalization of English is a process the world has never seen before, a change whose effects we can only imagine. To this extent therefore, Ostler in Adamu (2010:165) asserts that "English has emerged as a preeminent world language and being 'indicted' by linguists for the loss of several indigenous languages . . . it qualifies to be characterized, therefore, as the 'killer language' per excellence." Amaechi (2013) warn that "If we say because English is a world language and therefore should be our national language, we have not only succeeded in wiping out our indigenous languages but also built our nation on a foreign culture". Indigenous language being a potent vehicle of transmitting culture, norms, values and beliefs from generation to generation remains a central factor in determining the overall status of a nation (Yusuf, 2012), and should be maintained and promoted. The English

language has not only corrupted our language and culture by way of imposing alien culture on us but has changed our attitude towards our language and culture, we now think and act in English. This has a lot of negative impact on our indigenous language and calls for its promotion for posterity sake.

The roles of the indigenous language cannot be over emphasized, Ile (2013: 65), notes that language is “a set of symbols which embody, beyond their plain literal meaning, all the customs, feelings, beliefs of the group [people].” He therefore reiterates that “all forms of development will revolve around the values, beliefs, customs/culture and orientation of the people” (Ile, 2013:65–66). How then would speakers of indigenous language fold their hands and watch their indigenous asset being “assassinated”? Therefore, it is pertinent to inculcate our values, cultures, and arts in our children starting from the early childhood stage, using our indigenous languages.

As noted by Jibir-Daura (2014), indigenous language is not argued to be development's “saving grace”, rather it is seen as a tool with which to facilitate positive transformations and advancements by creating not only wider acceptance of existing diversity but also of facilitating a greater number of social opportunities.

Indigenous language is a powerful weapon for child-rearing practices. It plays a vital role in child up-bringing. Using precepts and rules of speaking or linguistic etiquette, children are initiated into their parents' speech community. Through songs, folktales, proverbs and adages, children are taught some moral lessons, how to speak with moral finesse, how to respect other's opinions and views and, how to engage in constructive criticism and dialogue (Olaoye, 2013: 43; Onu and Obianika, 2019: 41). The indigenous language is used to inculcate in individuals knowledge, the right values and attitudes to life. Bakare (2000) asserts that indigenous language has the capacity to develop curiosity, manipulative ability, spontaneous flexibility, initiative, industry, manual dexterity and mechanical comprehension, all leading to self-confidence, resourcefulness, creative reasoning and, all round development of a child.

According to Onu and Obianika (2019:41)

When the child interacts with speakers of his mother tongue, he learns more about the rules of speaking or socio-linguistic norms in the speech community, including of course the sanctions which go with the breach of the rules of speaking. He grows in native wisdom, knowledge and understanding. He learns societal ethos such as reciprocal respects for each other's “ opinions, humility, patience and other social values. He also imbibes positive moral attitude which makes him become a well-behaved, highly responsible, well-adjusted and disciplined citizen who shuns social vices like laziness, greed, avarice, corruption and other social vices. He thus becomes a man with high morality who can contribute positively to society. All these regulatory statements help the child and even the adults to develop a sense of responsibility and refinement in behavior.

Emphasizing on the roles of the indigenous language, Mazuri in Onu and Obianika (2019: 41) states that African languages are needed for mass mobilization, information dissemination; health education, self-reliance, and reduction of the incidence of brain drain.

A tripartite relationship between or among indigenous languages, literature and culture has been well established and documented, Olaoye and Isyaku (2004). According to them, there is no literature without language. Culture and language also are inseparable and the trios are intricately interwoven. They play vital role in the individual's livelihood and bring about all round development in the society. Literature is an art which entertains and instructs, it does these better when presented in the indigenous language. It warns people of danger and instructs by opening people's eyes to a wide range of experiences and a deeper understanding of these experiences, (Onu and Obianika, 2019). According to Fatokun (1992) literature presents situations, interactions and oppositions. It suggests a wide range of value and attitudes. To understand a people and their culture one may have to turn to their oral and written narratives, their drama and poetry. Culture is the whole way of life of a people, the social heritage that the individual acquires as a member of his group. It is the entire attitude, perception and specific traits of civilization that confer to a people and its place in the universe. These traits are speech norms, etiquette, ideologies, ethics, stereotypes, artifacts, technologies, intellectual production. Indigenous language is thus an indelible mark of a people's identity. Therefore, the teaching and learning of indigenous languages, literature and culture will afford the learner an understanding of the problems of the society. We cannot, therefore, overemphasize the importance of a society's indigenous languages, literature and culture as three interrelated sociolinguistic variables from whose milk the youth must drink in order to develop a healthy soul in a healthy body, (Onu and Obianika, 2019:42)

3. Why is the promotion of indigenous languages important?

With the lofty roles the indigenous language plays in the life of individual and the society at large there is the need to promote it. For emphasis sake the UN (2008) has outlined the importance of promoting the indigenous language as follows:

- Crucial to ensuring the protection of the cultural identity and dignity of indigenous peoples and safeguarding their traditional heritage.
- As a result of linguistic erosion, much of the encyclopedia of traditional indigenous knowledge that is usually passed down orally from generation to generation is in danger of being lost forever. This loss is irreplaceable and irreparable.
- Customary laws of indigenous communities are often set out in their languages, and if the language is not promoted the community may not fully understand its laws and system of governance that foster its future survival.
- The loss of indigenous languages signifies not only the loss of traditional knowledge but also the loss of cultural diversity, undermining the identity and spirituality of the community and the individual.
- Biological, linguistic and cultural diversity are inseparable and mutually reinforcing, so when an indigenous language is lost, so too is traditional knowledge on how to maintain the world's biological diversity and address climate change and other environmental challenges.

4. Indigenous Language Teachers' Challenges

a. Lack of Interest: The first among many factors is lack of adequate interest in the indigenous language by the owners of the language due to their general ignorance of the great potential that it offers. The native speakers of the indigenous language do not show adequate interest in it. They place and accommodate the English language top most in their language chart. They rather speak

the English language with pride and loyalty derogating their indigenous language to the background. Parents ensure that their children do not learn how to speak their language from home read and write it become problem in schools where they are thought. Agbanusi (2014) using the Igbo as an instance states that the English language means more to the Igbo people than just a lingua franca, they have decided to replace their native language with English. He further stated that most Igbo people cannot write or read the Igbo language properly and many cannot even speak it well, let alone be able to write well. The whole burden is now heap on the indigenous language teacher to activate interest on the child to learn how to speak, read and write a language that the child was born into. This has placed the indigenous language teacher at the cross line where he tries to bridge the gap created from home. Because the child has no interest in his language of birth, teaching/learning experience of the indigenous language becomes one hell of experience to the teacher.

b. Non implementation of the Language Policy of the NEP: Many unwise teachers place embargo on the use of the vernacular in schools in order to encourage proficiency in the use of the English language, the same reason some ignorant parents speak only the foreign tongue with their children at home (*Culture Digest*, 2010: 1). Charles (2006) further observes that English language enjoys considerable support from parents and teachers in the belief that it is an important door to modernism and success. That the ability to speak English in our globalised world constitutes an advantage is not in doubt nor is this being challenged. What is certainly not true is that knowledge and use of one or even two indigenous languages militates against one being able to master English or French for that matter (Charles, 2006: 1). In fact, the view expressed by UNESCO holds that mastery of these Western languages is more often than not predicated on the mastery of one's indigenous language, as against the fear held by some parents on our indigenous languages. Consequently, in order to address this problem the federal government provided in the *National Policy on Education the Language Policy* to enhance the sustenance of our indigenous languages. However, school authorities especially private schools do not allow their teachers to implement the policy as stated in NEP because they want their schools to be seen as the best schools. While many of the private schools do not teach any of the Nigerian indigenous languages as subject in their schools but teach foreign languages, such as French.

c. Dominance of the English Language over the Indigenous Language: Consequent upon our colonial experience under the British, English has become Nigeria's official and dominant educational language. It is used in its written form as the language of administration from the federal to the local government level. It is the language of commerce and industry, its knowledge therefore is an essential prerequisite for effective participation in the day-to-day running of Nigerian government (Oyetade, 2002: 34). To Igboanusi (2001), the dominance of English in Nigeria is overwhelming in virtually every domain, including inter-ethnic communication. English is used in all and at all levels of official business: education, commerce and industry, in the dispensation of justice, in all government departments and Parastatals at all levels of government. Official records are kept in English and official information is given principally in English. Government activities are published in gazettes and transmitted in the mass media in English. Furthermore, English is the official language of the National Assembly as well as the states Houses of Assembly. An average Nigerian sees learning of his/her language as unimportant since h/she can transact almost in every sphere with the English language. To them it is the language of the low class and cannot afford one good life, therefore there is no need to cooperate with the teacher.

d. Ignorance of the speakers: Many speakers of the indigenous language are ignorant of the importance of their language over any foreign language; because of this they still feel indifferent to the learning and speaking them in their homes. Children even take pride in saying they do not understand their mother tongue. The common trend in the contemporary society now is that parents do not want their children to speak their indigenous languages, believing that it would affect their ability to speak English language. This prohibition and discouragement has become the in-thing both at home and in the educational system because it is being regarded by many as the normal way of civilization and development. Ironically, it could be said that it is the high level of illiteracy, which is still prevalent in the rural areas today that is keeping our native languages alive. There is no gainsaying the fact that, our indigenous languages are very essential in giving children the opportunity to develop their native ability; but rather, they shy away from using them, and placing preference on foreign languages at the expense of our local languages. As it were, globalisation has made people to believe that it is when you speak English that you belong, which is not the case. This does not take cognizance of the fact that children are very impressionable at a tender age and once the love for indigenous languages is imbibed in them, they will take pride in such languages and would want to promote everything that comes with it. The vast majority of these languages are in fact at risk since they are not being systematically transmitted to the younger generation. These reasons have been the cause of non-active use of our indigenous languages in homes, schools, communities and even in the general society and have place a very big challenge on the indigenous teacher.

5. What can be done to protect and promote indigenous languages?

The survival and development of indigenous languages will require the will and efforts of indigenous peoples as well as the implementation of supportive policy, especially in the field of education, (UN, 2008). The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples – along with other relevant human rights standards - provides the foundation for developing policies and laws related to the promotion and strengthening of indigenous languages.

The following measures were proposed which the write supports:

- Guaranteeing the right to mother-tongue education for indigenous children.
 - Allocating the funding and resources needed to preserve and develop indigenous languages, and particularly for education.
 - Translating laws and key political texts into indigenous languages so that indigenous peoples may better participate in the political and legal fields.
 - Establishing language-immersion programmes for both indigenous children and adults.
 - Raising the prestige of indigenous languages by promoting the use of indigenous languages in public administration and academic institutions.
 - Using indigenous languages so that they are kept alive and passed down through the generations by indigenous peoples themselves.
- In addition,
- Building the interest of children in their own indigenous language. This could be done from home, because it is said that charity begins at home. When interest is built the child loves and cherishes his/her indigenous language and has interest in learning it which helps in sustaining it.
 - Monitoring of the implementation of the Language Policy by the government to ensure compliance.

- Too much emphasis and importance attached the use of the English language should be looked into; let States make laws that emphasizes their indigenous language for instance, mapping out days dedicated to the use of the indigenous languages in various offices of the state, observing cultural days more often and making sure that schools observe days to use the indigenous languages.
- Automatic employment for those that studied any of the indigenous languages. Students running programs in the indigenous languages should be encouraged by giving them bursary, subsidized school fees and other incentives given to medical and law students to encourage them and others to enrol.

Conclusion

The roles of the indigenous languages cannot be over emphasized, therefore should be promoted. However the indigenous language teacher as an agent for promoting the indigenous languages has not find it fun due to so many factors ranging from lack of interest, non-implementation of the Language Policy, dominance of the English language over the indigenous language and ignorance of the speaker militating against his efforts. The writer, therefore, suggests that the recommendation made in the work be implemented by all concern to ameliorate the challenges the indigenous language teacher.

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