

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND THE FADING IGBO MOTHER TONGUE : NURSERY AND PRIMARY EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE IGBO LANGUAGE AND CULTURE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The globalization of the English language has led to a significant decline in the usage and preservation of Igbo language, a major Nigerian language. Despite continuous efforts being geared towards sustaining Igbo language and culture over the years, there is however, obvious persistence of decline in Igbo literacy and mastery especially among children within the age of two to ten. This chapter therefore focuses on the critical issue of the fading Igbo mother tongue and explores the potential role of nursery and primary education in promoting sustainable Igbo language and culture development. The study specifically examines the attitudes of school administrators, teachers and parents of children within the nursery and primary school age towards teaching and learning Igbo. A survey of administrators, teachers and parents of children in selected nursery and primary schools in Awka, Anambra State shows the the poor attitudes of the nursery and primary school stakeholders towards Igbo, has adversely led to fast dwindling of Igbo language in the face of English as international language and of course the official Nigerian language. The paper recommends fortifying the language policies at all levels of education, adopting the use of e-resources in teaching nursery and primary school children, and provision of professional development opportunities for nursery and primary school educators to enhance their competencies in teaching Igbo language, and gear their minds towards being proud of the Igbo language and embracing the beauty of its cultural heritage for sustainable development.

Keywords: mother tongue, nursery/primary education, language policies, sustainable development

1 Introduction

Language is a distinct characteristic of human beings, and its development plays a vital role in shaping our identities, preserving our cultural heritage, and facilitating effective communication. Nwadike (2008) asserts that etymologically, language is a system of communication by written or spoken words used by humans to transmit knowledge across space and time". It is also a means of socialization. Through it, people's culture and world view are expressed. The author further opines that language is a 'sine qua non' in that it is the key to the heart of the people. If we lose the key he says, we lose the people, if we treasure the key and keep it safe, it will unlock the door to riches that cannot be guessed at from the other side of the door.

However, in today's global space, many indigenous languages are facing the risk of extinction as they struggle to adapt to the dominance of widely spoken global languages. One such endangered language is Igbo, a vibrant and rich language spoken by the Igbo people of Nigeria. The Igbo language, with its deep historical roots and diverse cultural expressions, is an integral part of the Igbo identity. Yet, the increasing influence of the English language, coupled with societal changes and educational policies, has resulted in a gradual erosion of the Igbo mother tongue among younger generations. This language shift poses a significant threat to the preservation and sustainable development of Igbo language and culture. Nursery and primary education serve as critical foundations for language acquisition and

cultural development. These formative years provide an opportune time for children to grasp the complexities of their mother tongue, nurturing a strong sense of cultural belonging and fostering intergenerational transmission of knowledge. However, the dominance of English as the medium of instruction in Nigerian schools has overshadowed the importance of nurturing indigenous languages like Igbo, creating a disconnection between young Igbo learners and their cultural heritage.

The work aims at addressing the pressing issue of the fading Igbo mother tongue within the context of nursery and primary education. By investigating the attitudes of school administrators, teachers, parents, and even the children themselves towards the Igbo language teaching and learning, this study seeks to empower educators, policymakers, parents and communities to take proactive steps in revitalizing the Igbo language and preserving its cultural significance. Generally, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on language preservation and cultural sustainability. By emphasizing the significance of early childhood education in promoting the Igbo language and culture, this study advocates for the implementation of nursery and primary education strategies that foster the development of linguistic and cultural identity among young Igbo children, ensuring the long-term sustainability of the Igbo mother tongue in the face of globalization and language shift. The research will also discuss various aspects, including the impact of English language dominance on Igbo language proficiency, the challenges faced by educators in promoting Igbo language instruction, the perceptions of parents and communities regarding the importance of Igbo language and culture, and the potential strategies and initiatives that can be implemented to integrate the teaching and learning of Igbo language effectively.

The present study was conceived out of the researcher's observation of constant neglect and disregard for Igbo language among school owners, their teachers, parents of the children and children themselves. The trending notion of getting the children communicate with English everywhere has eaten deep into our language and culture and will cause a huge damage to the language and its people in the nearest future if the situation is not urgently arrested. The obvious negative outcome of this trend triggered the researcher's interest in two dimensions. Firstly, in discovering the extent the provisions of National Policy on Education (2004) on the language of instruction to be used at the basic levels of children's education have been adopted and implemented. Secondly, attempting to ascertain the major causes of rapid decline in Igbo people's love and interest for their own language and culture.

These interests form the bedrock on which this work stands. This study therefore, seeks to ascertain the attitude of school administrators, teachers, parents and the children towards the provisions of NPE on language of instruction at basic levels of education of children. The subsequent parts of the work follow thus: Section 2 reviews related works and explicates the concepts adopted in the study. Section 3 is the methodology of the study. Section 4 presents the data and their analysis. Section 5 discusses the result of the study while section 6 concludes the study.

2 Review of Related Works

2.1 Mother Tongue and its importance

Mother tongue is the child's first language or the first language that a child grows into. It is therefore worthwhile that peoples' energies especially government, teachers, parents and community members, should be directed towards encouraging and promoting mother tongue education especially in nursery and primary schools. This becomes evident that in the education of the child, care should be taken to acculturate him properly in the language which serves not only as a medium of communication but also as a means of creating awareness in him concerning his environment, culture and ethics. Nwadike (2008) affirms that language is a very important tool for the development of a child. It helps in preparing a child for future life in the society. Since the aim of training them is to make them useful members of the society, it is necessary that educational policy makers put into considerations the important role of language especially the mother tongue in the development and life of a child while making the policy. By so doing, the future of the nation in general and the child in particular can be assured.

In addition to appreciating the importance of language (mother tongue) in educational process and as a means of preserving the people's culture, and its role in the development of a child, the language provisions of National Policy on Education (2013), affirms that every child should be taught in his mother tongue or the language of his immediate community for the first three years. The provisions also emphasize the use of mother tongue in nursery and early stage of primary education. This shows that the use of mother tongue in teaching and learning especially at this formation age of a child is very important and should not be taken for granted. Acknowledging this fact, Okoye (2022) opines that making e-resources available in indigenous languages will not only promote it but also ignite in our culture ad reposition teaching and learning of our minority languages, especially the Igbo language. She added that through constant interaction with these resources, the literacy level of our society will be improved and our culture preserved from possible extinction.

The use of indigenous language as a means of instruction in all subjects alongside with English Language at any level of education will not only overturn a long held dismissive attitude towards Nigerian Languages, but to a great extent strengthen the status of indigenous languages by providing a positive result in the performance of every learner. It provides an opportunity for the children to exercise their right to learn in their first language (Sumbalan et al (2017). The use of mother tongue as language of instruction will enforce additive bilingualism, address the goal of social equity as well as forge equal access to education and equal language rights for all citizens of the democratic country. (Elumelu (2017) stresses that in this 21st century, Nigeria should place emphasis on right policies that promotes not only access but inclusion and quality. Nolasco (2012) observes that when pupils use and master their first language used in their immediate environment or the entire country, they are able to develop critical, reasoning and problem-solving skills that they can use for life-long learning. Contributing to the importance of mother tongue as medium of instruction, Malone (2010) opines that indigenous language is language education program that helps build a strong educational foundation, then bridge successfully into one or more school languages, and then use both or all their languages for life-long-learning. There are huge number of researches that cited that language proficiency affects learners' achievement for children. Researchers like Akinola (2009), Ojo (2009) and Alimi (2012) acknowledge the use of mother tongue in teaching pupils in both pre-primary and primary schools. Adeyinka (1998) also states that 'if the Nigerian child is to develop curiosity, manipulative ability, spontaneity, flexibility, intuitive, manual dexterity, he should acquire these skills and attributes through the mother tongue as a medium of education or instruction which is the natural way of learning.

2.2 The Impact of English Language Dominance on Igbo Language Proficiency

The dominance of English and the low value ascribed to Igbo has invariably birthed and nurtured the trend to bring up children as monolingual speakers of English, a situation Ohiri-Aniche (1997) blames for killing the Igbo Language. Problems associated with the negative attitude towards Igbo are also closely connected to the dominance of English and its position as the preferred language in Nigeria. The Igbo people portray negative attitudes towards their language as asserted in Duruaku (2004) and Irono (2005). In support of the above assertion, Eme (2004) says that Igbo parents, especially the literate ones, do not speak Igbo to their children even at home. In some cases, she added, such parents ban their children from using Igbo to communicate among themselves. She points out that such these parents are proud to announce that that their children do not understand nor speak Igbo. In fact, they feel fulfilled at their children's mastery of the prestigious English Language, disregarding the awkward Igbo Language. Most Igbo parents do not take delight in transferring Igbo to their children. It is about this that Nwadike (2008) lamented that many Igbo parents do not want their children to speak Igbo. This class of parents gets offended with teachers who communicate with their children in Igbo. Some factors that have placed the English Language above the Igbo language are:

Education: Education can trigger either a positive or negative attitude-towards language. According to Chumbow (1990), language is the indispensable medium for the education and training of skilled manpower. The above statement explains why the use of the English Language in education, government, trade and other linguistic transactions in Nigeria led to the negative attitude of Igbo people towards their language. The English Language acquired a greater influence which detrimentally

affected the use of the Igbo Language. Sequel to this, the Igbo Language declined and is obviously at the verge of extinction. Consequent upon this, the Igbo Language has been abandoned – from the primary school to the tertiary levels – as language of instruction in favour of the English Language which is a great threat to Igbo language and culture.

Government Policy on Education: It is a common belief among scholars that when the government of a country makes a language policy which elevates one language as the official language of that nation, the given language will definitely enjoy a privileged status among the people since it serves as a means of carrying out official functions. This became the case of English language in Nigeria; its elevation as the official language in the country has given it the privilege and an edge over and above the indigenous languages in terms of use and function, and Igbo seems to suffer most from this dilemma.

Globalization: The concept of globalization has hugely permeated the economic and political territories of most nations that any country that does not measure up to its demands is termed underdeveloped and backward. Globalization plays a big role in determining whether a language thrives or not. It discourages diversity and promotes homogeneity, thereby suggesting the speaking of the same kind of language. On this, Fishman (2001) states, “in our day and age, it is definitely the globalization of the Western culture that is the motto shift”. And since America’s dominance, globalization has become the major economic, technological and cultural thrust of world-wide modernization and westernization. Hence, the need to safeguard threatened languages. Igbo people seem to have been driven by the power of globalization to develop a negative attitude towards their language, which has resulted in fast deterioration of the language. In our schools, markets, public places, business sectors and most disheartening at homes, no one seems to speak Igbo language anymore. In the words of Obinna (2002), “With a population that fluctuates between twenty and thirty million, and reaching out from Imo, Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Ebony State and beyond, the Igbo language continues to mark time or even regress.” This view seems to be strengthened by the obvious reality that the Igbo people are generally not good speakers of Igbo.

3 Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey design. Data was collected using a structured questionnaire and observations. The study was carried out in six (6) selected nursery and primary schools in Awka metropolis. The survey was conducted from April to early June 2023. The structured questions were administered in each school to the head teacher and a teacher, twenty pupils (ten from nursery section and the other ten from primary section) and three parents making a total of one hundred and fifty (150) respondents. Following the research objectives, nine questions guided the research. Some of these questions were structured to be Yes or No questions meant to be answered by each of the three categories of respondents, three questions for each category. They were made in such a way that the respondent’s levels of interest in Igbo language and their attitudes towards Igbo language teaching and learning and the pupils’ mastery of Igbo language and culture will be ascertained. The questions were administered and collected back from the respondents immediately and that makes for full participation of the respondents. The questions are as follows:

For School Administrators/Teachers

- Do you use Igbo language for instruction in your school?
(1) Yes (2) No
- Do you use Igbo textbooks for your pupils?
(1) Yes (2) No
- Do you use Igbo e-resources for the pupils?
(1) Yes (2) No

For parents

- Do you tell Igbo folktales and sing Igbo rhymes for your children at home?
(1) Yes (2) No
- In which language do you provide basic learning material for your children?
[] Igbo, [] English, [] Others

- Which language do you speak to your children?
 [] Igbo [] English [] Others

For Pupils

- Can you speak Igbo fluently?
 (1) Yes (2) No
- Can you identify and recite some Igbo rhymes and folktales?
 (1) Yes (2) No
- Can you recite the Igbo alphabets?
 (1) Yes (2) No
 If Yes do the recitation.

The data was collected and analyzed using frequency tables and simple percentages.

Table 1: Distribution of Questionnaire and Retrieval

	Frequency	Percentage %
Total No of Copies of Questionnaire Administered	150	100%
Retrieved	150	100%
Not retrieved	0	0%
School Administrator/Teacher	12	8%
Parents	18	12%
Pupils	120	80%
Total No of Respondents	150	100%

This table shows the number and percentage of questionnaires administered, number and percentages of retrieved and unretrieved questionnaires and number and percentages of respondents.

Table 2: Nursery and Primary Schools used as Sample for the Study

Name of School	No of School Admin./Teacher	No of Parents	No of Pupils
Enzy Royal Schools	2	3	20
Aquainas Nursery and Primary School	2	3	20
St Lucy Nursery and Primary School	2	3	20
Grand Hermano International School	2	3	20
Dr Obioma Achebe Memorial Montessori School	2	3	20
Amansea Nursery And Primary School	2	3	20
Total	12	18	120

This table shows the nursery and primary schools that participated in the exercise, and number of respondents from each school. The number of respondents from each school does not change to maintain equal distribution.

4 Data Presentation and Analyses

The presentation of data will be in three sub- sections. The first sub-section presents the data from the school administrators/ teachers, the second sub-section presents data from parents, while the third sub-section presents data from pupils. The values representing the study population were got using simple percentage.

Data from School Administrators/Teachers

Table 3: Do you use Igbo language for instruction in your school?

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	2	16.7%
No	6	50%
Undecided	4	33.3%
Total	12	100%

Table 4: Do you use Igbo textbooks for your pupils

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	6	50%
No	6	50%
Undecided	0	0%
Total	12	100%

Table 5: Do you use Igbo e-resources for the pupils

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	0	0%
No	12	100%
Undecided	0	0%
Total	12	100%

From tables 3-5 above, we determine the level of the Igbo language usage as language of instruction and application of the Igbo teaching aids and tools for nursery and primary school pupils by the school instructors.

- Up to 75% of the respondents do not use the Igbo language as a means of instruction in their schools. 16.7% of them make use of Igbo while 33.3% use both English and Igbo as means of instruction. This is not encouraging as the pupils are not gaining grounds in the mastery of the Igbo language and culture with the percentage we have.
- From respondents' responses, the percentages of schools that make use of the Igbo textbooks (50%) and that of those that do not use it (50%) are on the average, which is still questionable at this stage of children's education and of course in an Igbo speaking area.
- The use of Igbo e-resources is 0% in all the schools. What it implies is that none of these schools employs the available Igbo e-resources in teaching and impacting the necessary knowledge to their pupils. Some schools are not aware of the availability of the Igbo e-resources, while some do not have access to it as observed by Okoye (2022). But it what is so appalling is that up to 50% of private schools, especially those that claim the Montessori method of education do not include Igbo in their list of e- learning resources.

Data from Parents of the Selected Schools

Table 6: Do you tell Igbo folktales and sing Igbo rhymes for your children at home?

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	0	0%
No	18	100%
Undecided	0	0%
Total	18	100%

Table 7: In which language do you provide basic learning material for your children?

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Igbo	3	16.7%
English	9	50%
Both	6	33.3%
Total	18	100%

Table 8: Which language do you speak to your children?

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Igbo	3	16.7%
English	11	61.1%
Both	4	22.2%
Total	18	100%

Tables 6-8 show the attitudes of parents towards helping their children in the mastery of their indigenous language and culture. From parents' responses, we were able to deduce the following:

- 100% of the parents under our survey do not tell their children folktales in Igbo nor sing Igbo rhymes for them at home. This is quite disheartening. Parents prefer buying expensive gadgets for kids that contain all these rhymes and stories in English to providing them in Igbo.
- 16.7% of the parents provide basic learning materials in Igbo, 50% provide for them in English while about 33.3% of them provide for them in both Igbo and English.
- Only 16.7% of the parents indicated that they interact with their children in Igbo. About 61.1% of them interact with them in English while 22.2% of them interact with them in both English and Igbo.

Data from Pupils of the Selected Schools

Table 9: Can you speak Igbo fluently?

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	38	25.3%
No	87	58%
Undecided	25	16.7%
Total	150	100%

Table 10: Can you identify and say some Igbo rhymes and folktales?

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	30	20%
No	115	76.7%
Undecided	5	3.3%
Total	150	100%

Table 11: Do you know how to recite the Igbo alphabet?

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	4	2.7%
No	131	87.3%
Undecided	15	10%
Total	150	100%

Tables 9-11 presents the level of the pupils' Igbo literacy skills. From the pupils' responses, we got the following:

9. Only 25.3% of the pupils can speak Igbo fluently. About 58% cannot freely express themselves in Igbo, and 25% of them can speak both Igbo and English fluently.
10. 20% of the pupils can identify and say some Igbo rhymes and folktales. 76.7% cannot while 3.3% cannot give any answer.
11. To recite the Igbo alphabet is a big nut to crack for most children. Unlike the English alphabet which they can recite even when they are woken from sleep, most of them cannot even mention A B CH D not to talk of continuing. From our investigation, only 2.7% know and can recite the Igbo alphabet to some extent jumping some letters. 87.3% neither know nor can recite it, while about 10% cannot readily give answers.

5. Result and Discussion

The percentage average of the three categories of respondent were further calculated and represented with pie chart in Figs. 1a, b and c. The percentage average is calculated thus: Total frequency divided by total percentage multiplied by one hundred.

Percentage distribution on the attitudes of school instructors in the use of the Igbo language as means of instruction, use of Igbo textbooks and use of Igbo e-resources shows a great decline and pure negative attitudes of nursery and primary school instructors towards the Igbo language teaching and learning. 2.7 school instructors out of 12 representing 22.2% of the study population use Igbo to teach the pupil and use Igbo textbooks and e-resources. 8 school instructors out of 12 represent 66.7% of the study population that do not conform to the usage of the above mentioned in their schools. Those that are undecided have their number to be 1.3 out of 12 which translates to 11.1% of the study population (Fig. 1a). Ministry of Education should therefore take proactive measures to ensure that all schools adopt and practice what is contained in the NPE. Periodic monitoring of school activities and proper supervisions should be made, and defaulters sanctioned.

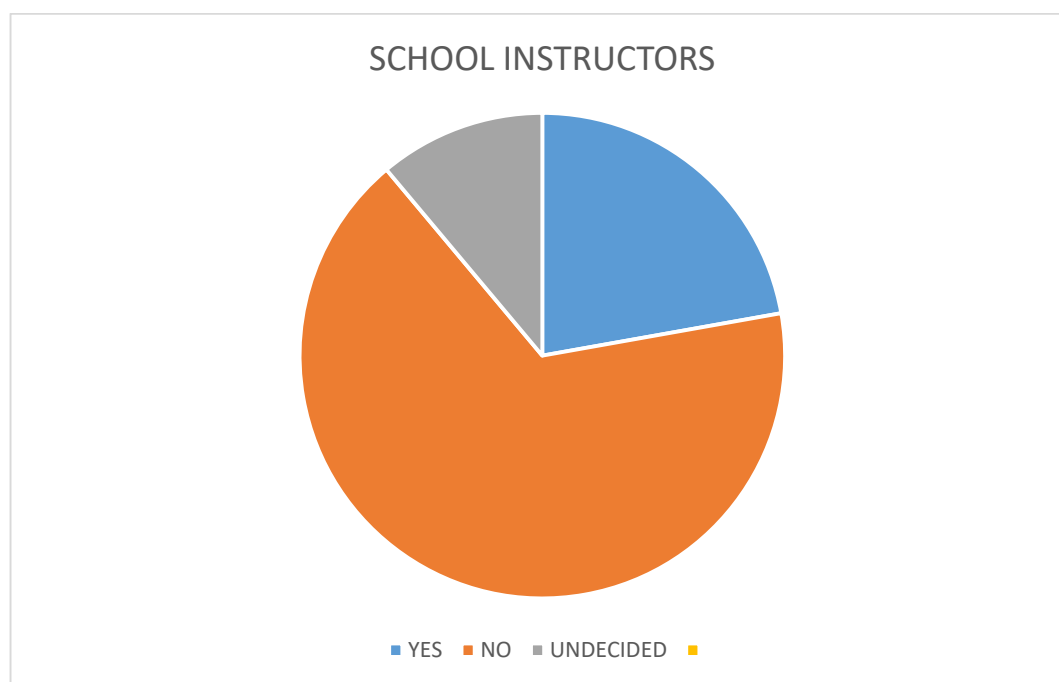


Fig. 1a: Percentage Distribution of School Instructors and their Attitudes Towards the Use of Igbo language for Instructions, Use of Igbo Textbooks and the Use of Igbo E-Resources

On the attitudes of parents towards instilling the Igbo language and culture to their children through parent-child interaction, questions on whether they tell Igbo folktales and rhymes to their children, provide them basic Igbo learning materials, communicate with them in Igbo, the percentage distribution reveals lack of interest and careless attitudes of parents towards instilling in the children the fundamental knowledge of their mother tongue and their cultural identity. Only 2 parents out of 18 which amounts to 11.1% of the study population exhibit positive attitude towards instilling in their children desire to learn their native language and their cultural identity. About 12.7 out of 18 parents which constitutes a greater number of the study population, and is equal to 70.4% exhibit very poor attitude towards helping their children to learn their native language and culture. 3.3 parents out of 18 that represent 18.5% of the study population are undecided (Fig. 1b). Hence the need to orient the parents of school children the importance of having their mother tongue as foundation at the early stage of their educational development.

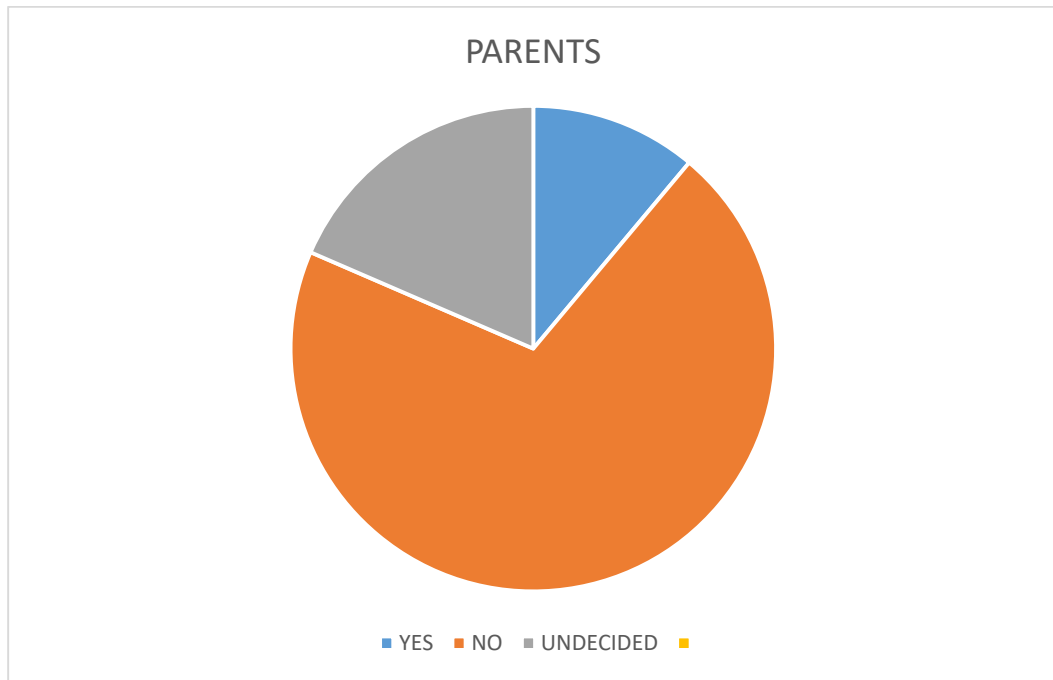


Fig. 1b: Percentage Distribution of Parents and their Attitudes Towards Telling Igbo Folktales and Singing Igbo Rhymes to their Children, Providing them the Basic Igbo Teaching and Learning Materials and Interacting with them in Igbo

Questions to the pupils on whether they speak Igbo fluently, identify and say some Igbo rhymes and folktales, know how to recite the Igbo alphabet reveal a great decline in the percentage distribution of the pupils. They also show the effect of the negative attitudes of school instructors and parents towards teaching and learning of the Igbo language on the pupils. This is a danger signal concerning the Igbo language development because with situation at hand, the language is facing extinction in the nearest future. Just 24 pupils out of 150 that translates to only 16% of the study population that can fluently speak Igbo, can identify and say some Igbo rhymes and folktales and can recite the Igbo alphabet. Those who cannot do the above have their number as 111 pupils out of 150 which amounts to 74%. For those that are undecided, they are 15 out of 150 which represents 10% of the study population (Fig. 1c). There is therefore urgent need to reverse this narrative in to save the Igbo language from possible endangerment.

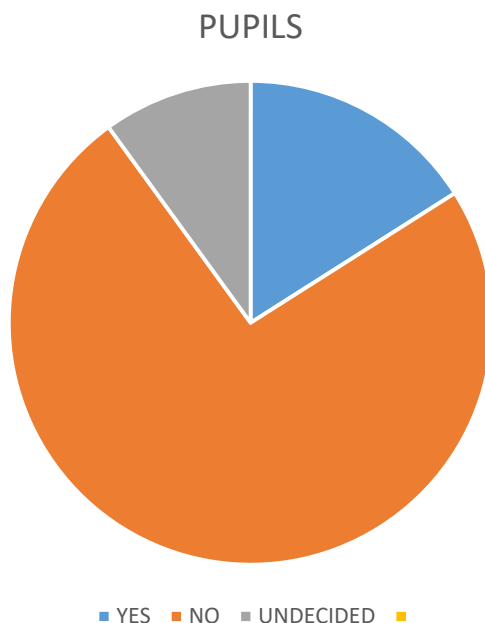


Fig. 1c: Percentage Distribution of Nursery and Primary School Pupils' Ability to Speak Igbo Fluently, Identify and Recite Igbo Rhymes and Tell Igbo Folktales and Recite the Igbo Alphabet

From the result, it is deduced that:

- (a) Most nursery and primary schools do not use the mother tongue (the Igbo language) as medium of instruction.
- (b) Few use Igbo textbooks and other teaching aids.
- (c) almost all schools visited tend not to be aware of the e-resources for nursery and primary school pupils. Those that seem to know about it prefer using the English e-resources. Some that know about it suffer inaccessibility to it.
- (d) Most schools that deviate from adhering to the above are private schools that claim the Montessori method of education.
- (e) Parents do not tell the children Igbo folktales or sing Igbo rhymes and other Igbo traditions that help to build the child socially, physically, morally and otherwise.
- (f) Parents shy away from their responsibility of inculcating in the children the cultural values and their mother tongue by communicating with them in the language. They rather prefer them do everything in English and are proud when the child says, 'I don't understand Igbo'.
- (g) The lack of interest and poor attitudes of school instructors and parents towards the teaching and learning of the Igbo language at the early stage of children's education adversely reflect on the children's own attitude towards speaking and understanding the language.
- (h) To recite the Igbo alphabet is a hard nut to crack for almost all the pupils, but they can do that of the English at ease. This is quite unacceptable for a language like Igbo that has up to 2 million populations.

The ministry of education in collaboration with Igbo organizations that foster the promotion of Igbo language and culture should urgently procure means of arresting this ugly situation and revive the almost dead Igbo language and culture. This study therefore suggests organizing series of programs for school administrators, teachers, parents and the school children on the importance and advantages of using the mother tongue (Igbo language) in interacting with the children. The children should also be encouraged and motivated through scholarships, award giving in best performances in Igbo quizzes, Igbo WAEC results, Igbo spelling bees, Igbo essay competitions, Igbo cultural displays Igbo debates and more. This to a great extent will help to bring back the already lost dignity and pride of Igbo as a people and thereby preserve their language and culture for sustainable development.

6. Conclusion

The position accorded to the English language as the official language in the country has adversely affected the indigenous languages such as the Igbo language. Using English in schools and almost the human endeavors in the country has made Igbos especially the educated ones to have the mindset that without the English language one cannot excel. This notion has adversely influenced greater number of Igbos against their mother tongue, which has given rise to lack of interest, disregard and neglect of the Igbo language and its culture. Most school administrators especially private school owners do not deploy the use of the Igbo language as means of instruction and sometimes prohibit the pupils from speaking it in the schools.

Parents on their own parts see Igbo speaking by their children as one of the criteria for identifying unintelligent child and therefore try every possible means to see that these children do not get the bases for knowing the language. They communicate with them in English, provide necessary learning materials for them in English just to see that they do not have the foundation of learning the Igbo language and culture.

These negative attitudes of nursery and primary school instructors and parents towards the teaching and learning of the Igbo language and culture has a reflection in the children's way of viewing learning the mother tongue (the Igbo language). They do not like speaking Igbo or associate with anything that has to do with Igbo. To change this situation, all the education stakeholders in collaboration with well-meaning Igbo people should urgently put hands on deck and procure a viable and sustainable means to save the Igbo language and culture that is already at the verge of extinction.

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