

ENHANCING THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF IGBO LANGUAGE IN SCHOOLS

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Abstract:

Nigeria has been described as a multi-lingual country where over 400 indigenous languages exist. Among all these indigenous languages, three prominent languages are made compulsory in schools especially in Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE), National Examination Council (NECO) and General Certificate of Education (GCE). Students are expected to have a credit pass in Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba Languages before they are eligible for admission into a university to study a course. Objectives are set to highlight the importance of Igbo Language, the need for effective teaching and learning of Igbo Language in Schools, the strategies for teaching and learning of Igbo Language and the challenges encountered in teaching and learning of Igbo Language in Schools. Descriptive research design was adopted. Data were generated through the internet, library and documented materials relevant to the study. Behaviourist theory was utilized to explain importance of Igbo Language in teaching and learning. Findings revealed that the standard of Igbo Language has fallen because of the imposition of the western education and other technological advancement in the country and Ndiigbo prefer to express themselves in foreign languages as an evidence of being educated. Based on the findings, recommendations and conclusion were drawn.

Introduction

Language is as old as the world itself which started when man started and can be described as an important ingredient for culture. God created man and positioned him to take care of his environment with the aid of language. Ebere (2010) affirms that language is a means through which culture can be transferred from one generation to another and as the culture of a society is growing, the language as well grows correspondingly, in order to transmit the culture. According to Nwadike (2011:1):

... language is the embodiment of a people's life experiences, crystallizing it through and giving concrete meaning to its ethos. A people that lose their language will be a people without a culture, they cannot be identified as a people. They become a people without a future and identity.

From what is written above, one can see that language is the engine that carries the society around. That is why Akpu and Opara (2015) said that language is not only a means for transferring information but a very important means for establishing and maintaining relationship with one another and man can make progress in all spheres of life in the world today with his ability to communicate through his language.

Igbo language is the language of Igbo people of South-Eastern Nigeria. It is the language of instruction for people living in Abia State, Imo State, Anambra State, Delta State, Enugu State, Ebonyi State and part of River State of Nigeria. Among all these States Igbo language is their mother tongue and a language studied in school. A child is expected to be grounded in his or her indigenous language where he or she comes from in order to interact properly in the society. Akpu and Opara (2015) affirm that issues that cannot be expressed in the public can only be disclosed by the use of indigenous language. It is the language people can express themselves very well. In terms of development of students imagination, creativity, spirit of inquiry and harmonious co-existence, language plays a significant role

in communicating information, hence teaching and learning would have a problem if there is no indigenous language.

Igbo language according to N.P.E. (2013) is a core subject in Nigeria both in primary, junior and senior secondary levels of our education system. It is a lingua franca in South-Eastern part of Nigeria, and is also used in the media and the academia, a force to reckon with when compared with other minor dialects in Igbo language. Despite all these, the language is still lagging behind in incorporating information and communication technology. Bloom (1973) in Ojubanire (2003:280) says:

Language determines in large measure the way we look at the world. It enables us to control it, it links the past intimately with the present and makes possible at least some continuity into future, it possesses magic and hypnotic power. It may elevate and depress. We cannot escape its influence even by silence. We need it to grasp things intellectually and to get others to do so, we cannot avoid it even when we talk about it. To a large extent it defines our humanity.

On the side of Agboola (2011:325): “A simple way to illustrate the situated nature of language used by considering how descriptive are constructed and description are a universal feature of social life.” Based on this, for a people to keep their language growing, there must be conscious effort made by the owners of the language to meet up with new innovations towards the teaching and learning of such language in schools. At this point, Igbo people should make effort to have their language growing along side with other languages of the world.

Statement of Problem

The need for the teaching and learning of Igbo Language cannot be overemphasized. The importance values inherent in Igbo Language informed its introduction into the School System because it is the language of the immediate environment and students learn better with the language of their environment.

However, the language is not given adequate attention because of people’s laxity toward the study in school. According to Okere (2010), Principals, Headmasters and Class Teachers discourage Igbo Language speaking in school and impose fine and punishment on the defaulters in the school premises. Parents also prefer speaking English Language to their children thereby making them strangers in their fatherland.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to examine:

1. The importance of Igbo Language.
2. The need for effective teaching and learning of Igbo Language.
3. The strategies for teaching and learning of Igbo Language.
4. The challenges encountered in teaching and learning of Igbo Language in Schools.

Scope of the Study

The study is meant to examine how to enhance the teaching and learning of Igbo Language in Schools. The study was carried out in Nigeria precisely in Igboland. The focus of the study was on importance of Igbo Language, the need for effective teaching and learning, strategies and challenges in teaching and learning of Igbo Language.

Methodology

The research design adopted in this study was descriptive research design. Data were generated through internet and documented materials. In addition documented and previous study on journals, textbooks, seminar papers and newspapers were reviewed.

Literature Review

The literature review of the study are presented under the following headings: Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Framework.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptual Framework refers to term, terminologies and concepts that are operationally explained in relation to the topic. The terms are as follows: mother tongue/language of the immediate environment, language acquisition and language learning and concept of bilingualism/multilingualism.

Mother Tongue/Language of the Immediate Environment

Mother tongue is the language spoken by the inhabitants of an area which are their natural instrument for communication (Nwajiuba and Okereke, 2009). When a child is exposed to the language in his environment during the stage of development, the child will speak and understand that language. If at infant stage, a child is exposed to five different languages, the child will understand them. But the first language of a child is the language spoken in his environment which may be different from his/her mother tongue. For example, if a Yoruba couple leave Yoruba land and settles in Igbo land with the children, and the language of communication is Igbo, the children will speak Igbo language and became very fluent on the language. The couple might be speaking Yoruba to the children but they will also learn the language of the environment. Therefore, in this case the mother tongue and language of the environment would be used interchangeably.

Language Acquisition/Language Learning

Language acquisition and language learning according to Okonkwo (2007), is two different terms in language study. Language acquisition takes place during the period of infant when the child is maturing physically and mentally, while language learning takes place when the learner has already developed communication competence in the language of his or her environment. At the ages of three years, human beings have the ability to acquire language without being taught in a formal school certain. Okonkwo (2007), further said that normal child's language development during infant period can be viewed as a series of successive and overlapping stages. In other words language learning is to acquire new set of linguistic utterance which is different from the already acquired one, i.e. the language of the immediate environment. In this case the learner has the mother tongue already and it is the first language.

Concept of Bilingualism/Multilingualism

According to Habu (2018), Bilingual is a person who has the ability to speak second language and has strong command of both languages (sometimes it is called bilingualism). The most important thing in bilingual situation is the ability to identify each of the languages, i.e. the varieties of the languages involved and to identify the way each of the languages is acquired. Both mother tongue and second or foreign language suggests different possible kind of proficiency and also to note the age of learning and the time spent using the language.

Habu (2018) further said Bilingualism is a cover term for multilingualism. It is a situation where a group of persons or a person speaks more than two languages. Bilingualism is used to refer to individuals or group who use two or more languages in the context for communication.

Theoretical Framework

According to Habu (2018: 57) "Theories of leaning are formulated and if well applied can explain and predict the behavior of learners". Ogidi (2017) added that human actions are predicted on theories, assumptions which are mental roadmaps that guide their behavior. We have different theories of language learning which can give account for mother tongue (L1) or second language (L2). The theories are: Behaviourist, cognitivist and universal grammar theories of learning. Through theories one can understand other possibilities and the world around. Based on these behaviourists theory of learning can direct relevance to the study.

According to Rivers (2009) in Habu (2018), the behaviourist theory of stimulus response learning was developed by Skinner in 1957 which "considers all learning to be the establishment of habits as a result of reinforcement and reward". In view of this, human beings respond to numerous stimuli in their environment when they are exposed to it. Language as a verbal behavior can be learnt or acquired through imitation and reinforcement. The emphasis of the behaviourists are placed much on the role of environment in learning and development of a language.

The Importance of the Teaching and Learning of Igbo Language in Schools

The importance of Igbo language generally cannot be over emphasized because there is no aspect of life in this world that does not need the use of language. Language is very important in everything we do, be it in politics, education, social, commerce, economic and so on, and for us to move on with daily activities the indigenous language (Igbo) should be used both in our houses, places of work and even in the market. Language plays an utmost role in establishing and maintaining relationship with other people. Even the progress made in all spheres of life today can rightly be attributed to man's ability to communicate through language.

Igbo language is a language studied in schools in Igbo land and in big cities in the northern and western part of Nigeria. This showcases the importance of Igbo language in the educational process and a means of preserving people's culture. In addition to this fact, Ekere (2010:106) opines that: "Language is the vehicle for the transmission of culture and for culture of a society to grow, language must grow correspondingly, otherwise the culture cannot be transmitted." According to Ajah (1996) the activities of the town crier and his "Ekwe" rooted from culture and through language, culture can be transmitted from one generation to another. In the other hand, a society will cease to exist, if the members fail to communicate with each other. So looking at the relationship existing between language and culture one can see that language is a means through which culture finds expression.

Teaching and learning of Igbo language is of great importance because it is used for various things which include the democratic governance of the people. It is a convention which means that it is acceptable and used by a group of people, community or nation. It is used to pass information or to share knowledge from one generation to another where every member is conformed to agree on it and accept. Bauma and Sherzer (1974) as quoted by Akano (2011:202) explain that:

Word and sentence are used as they are only, because the speakers in a language community agree on such matters: and that is a set of community norms, operations, principles, strategies and values that guide the production and interpretation of speech which is termed the community ground rules for speaking.

One of the requirements for successful communication is the ability of the sender to transfer the message in such a way that the receiver will be able to understand it easily. Any wrong selection from linguistic items such as phonology, syntax and vocabulary is capable of leading to a breakdown in communication. Language is used for interaction with people in order to give or receive information for a task to be accomplished.

The Need for Effective Teaching and Learning of Igbo Language in Schools

Language teaching and learning is a social phenomenon; as a result, the ability to learn Igbo language has some social influence on the people that own the language. Igbo language is the language of the immediate environment of which every Igbo man residing in Igbo land should learn to speak the language fluently. Akano (2011) added that a child who is not grounded in his or her mother tongue will find himself or herself definitely a social misfit. People can express themselves better in the language of the immediate environment and even use idioms to confuse the non-speakers of the language without their knowing. According to one of Igbo proverbs which say "Onye Iberibe amaghi mgbe e kere nku ukwa". This is exactly what is happening to our children today because their parents' attitude towards Igbo language, at the same time making the children stranger in their father land.

All hope are not lost, these attitudes towards the teaching and learning of Igbo language can be changed thereby promoting the language in Nigeria. The method and materials for the improvement are so diverse that the teacher can employ these measures to improve in the teaching and learning of the language. The most important emphasis on the study would be upon the teaching skills used in teaching the language because formal learning takes place in schools.

Strategies for Teaching and Learning of Igbo Language in Schools

Research has shown that Igbo language is facing many problems which militate against the teaching and learning of the language. The strategies of teaching and learning are as follows:

Instructional Materials

The materials for teaching and learning of Igbo language are not farfetched, the materials can be secured or made by students and the teacher themselves. For instance, simple apparatus, pictures, charts, maps, slides, posters, and textiles to mention but a few. Government can also assist in so many ways by providing some of these instructional materials in schools.

It is good to note at this point that for teaching and learning of Igbo language to be effective certain things should be put in place and the need to use relevant instructional materials during teaching and learning become necessary and not to be taken for granted. Okafor (2011:171) supports this when he states that “when a learner hears, sees and touches, he understands better, learning takes place faster and retention is permanent. It is obvious that the teacher needs teaching aids that will help to facilitate learning and retention easy because seeing is believing. These instructional materials can be used to motivate and sustain the interest of the students in the class. Okafor (2011) maintained that instructional materials stimulate the students intellectually, sustain the learner during the learning activities and make them develop positive attitude towards the concept being taught.

Discussion/Communication Method

This method is one of the methods that can be used to facilitate teaching and learning of Igbo Language in schools. The method is all about engaging the students in communication and interactive competence which will be more of learners centered approach. Here the learner will be engaged in argument in Igbo language to test his or her interest on the subject. The most important thing is to teach the learner how to use the language forms appropriately in a variety of contexts.

Constructivist Technique

According to Igbo (2007) Piaget emphasized that children learn better by seeking solution for themselves. This can be done through discoveries, reflecting on them and discussing them in the absence of the teacher. Students can develop understanding through active construction of knowledge rather than imitating or depending on the teacher, this will make them the author of their knowledge. Students can be exposed to the thinking of other students, this will create opportunities for them to evaluate and refine their understanding. This can help the students in cognitive development. Igbo (2007) went further to say that some theories have emphasized that students learn and construct knowledge through interaction with others. At this point teachers should serve as facilitators not directors or moulders of children’s learning. So teachers are expected to provide support for students to explore and develop their knowledge, as this will create brainstorming sessions for students with good learning strategy.

Major Challenges Encountered in Teaching and Learning of Igbo Language

One of the challenges facing the teaching and learning of Igbo language is the Poor attitude of Igbo people towards the Language. According to Ekere (2010) Igbo people prefer to express themselves in foreign languages as an evidence of being educated and this has given a traumatic blow on the language. Students on their own side look down on the language by refusing to offer it in exams or use it to makeup number of subjects required for external examinations. These students need to be encouraged because language is the livewire of a nation. According to Nwadike (2011:1). “A people that lose their language will be a people without a culture, and when once a people have no culture, they cannot be identified as a people. They become people without a future and identity.” The above is trying to articulate the great role which language play in the life of a group of people, because language is the embodiment of people’s experiences in life.

No good libraries for research: In most secondary schools today, libraries are not well equipped, the shelves are empty of books and students cannot find what they want in time of research. This will not help the students to cultivate the habit of reading and the spirit of enquiry, thereby lowering the standard of education.

Teachers are not well motivated: Iwuamadi (2008:226) posits that “no Nation could rise above the quality of her teachers”. The problem of nonpayment of salaries has done more harm than good in our country because teachers are looking for other means of livelihood in order to make ends meet, thereby hinders them from inculcating the right training to the students.

Lack of seminars and workshops: Learning is a continuous process and teachers are not finished products despite that they are professionally trained and certified still there is need for seminars and workshops to update their knowledge on the information across the globe. But teachers especially those in secondary schools are always silent over seminars and workshops not knowing that education is a systematic process.

Ekere (2010:111) reporting on the issue said that:

Lack of seminar and excursion to places of cultural and historical importance makes the teaching of all aspect of Igbo language like prose, drama, grammar, customs and institutions very poor. Regularly sponsored seminars and refresher courses where most of the non-specialist teachers will be updating their knowledge of the subject.

I quite agree with Ekere (2010) because practice makes perfect, seminars and workshops can help to promote the teaching and learning of Igbo language in schools.

Poor Attitude of Parents towards the Language:

According to Akpu and Opara (2015), the society places little value on Igbo language. How many of our parent will allow their children to read Igbo language in school. Over ninety-five percent of our youths will not like to study Igbo language in a higher institution not to talk of speaking the language. Government efforts to make Igbo language compulsory in senior secondary school examination has not helped matters because the rejection has a stronger force in secondary schools. Nwadike (2002) laments that Igbo people have been known to neglect their language and the worst is that many parents frown at people when speaking Igbo language to their children that is why they push their children to private schools where they will not speak Igbo language. A woeful attitude, maka onye ruru ala ruo onwe ya amaghi ala aru.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to enhance the teaching and learning of Igbo language in schools:

1. The Government should fund education adequately and give scholarship to best students in Igbo language in schools.
2. The Government should make the three major languages in Nigeria compulsory for admission into Nigerian universities so that every student will be accountable for his or her ethnic language.
3. The Government should give automatic employment to the best student in Igbo Language.
4. Parents should allow their children to speak and study Igbo Language as a course in the University.
5. Workshops and seminars should be periodically organized for teachers of Igbo Language to keep them abreast with information on latest development and techniques of teaching and learning of Igbo language.
6. The Government should increase the number of teachers handling Igbo Language in Schools for better performance.

Conclusion

Igbo Language is a language just like all other languages of the world that are used for instruction in schools and the language has gained national recognition as one of the three major languages in Nigeria. The need to improve the teaching and learning becomes necessary because of the imposition of western education and other technological advancement in the country, coupled with the attitude of teachers, parents and educated elites towards the language. Therefore, this attitude must stop for better tomorrow, if not, our oral tradition and culture will die on the way because it can only be transmitted through the use of Igbo Language.

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