

Indigenous Language Revitalization for Sustainable Development: Igbo Language in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Language is endangered when it is on the path towards extinction. This occurs when its speakers cease to use, reduce its communication use or fail to pass it on from one generation to another. Language revitalization efforts are rooted in the community initiatives, investment and commitment. Igbo language can be said to be in danger since majority of the young generation cannot speak or write Igbo. Revitalization of the indigenous languages will help to reduce underdevelopment in most spheres of life. Most countries like China that use their mother tongue for all communicative purposes are progressing more than their counterparts because it fosters intellectual development. The question now is how can the Igbos effectively initiate processes that will consequently revitalize the language for sustainable development? Data for the research was collected from children living in the urban and rural areas of Igbo community. Data analysis was done using descriptive method and the researcher's intuitive knowledge of Igbo language. Findings reveal that causes of language endangerment are mostly political and educational subjugation, government control, people's negative attitude toward their language and so on. Moreover, children in the rural area speak and write Igbo language more effectively than those in the urban areas. This suggests that Igbo language is more endangered in the urban areas than in the rural areas. It was recommended that parents should speak Igbo to their children. School administrators and teachers should also stop the syndrome of no speaking of vernacular and obey the Nigerian policy on education which stipulates that the medium of instruction for the first three years in primary schools should be principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community. Government should restructure school language curriculum to favour the learning of the indigenous languages in all levels of education.

KeyWords: Language, Indigenous Language, Language Revitalization, Sustainable Development, Igbo Language.

Introduction

An indigenous language is a language that is native to a region and spoken by indigenous people/ native people. It is a language from a linguistically distinct community that originated in the area. Many indigenous people worldwide have stopped passing on their ancestral languages to the next generation and have instead adopted the majority language as part of their acculturation into the majority culture. Igbo people are not exempted from the above assertion. In the major cities in Igbo land, it will be difficult to find an Igbo child speaking Igbo language. These kids mainly speak the official language which is English or Pidgin English. Parents have the notion that it is only through the colonial master's language that one can progress in life. School administrators and teachers follow suit in order to please their clients (Ramlatu2014).

Many indigenous languages are endangered while some are at the point of extinction. This is why United Nations proclaimed the year 2019 as the International year of Indigenous languages in order to draw attention to the critical loss of indigenous languages and the urgent need to preserve, revitalize and promote them.

Language revitalization refers to as an act of reversing the decline of a language or revive an extinct one. It is the process of rescuing of a dying language. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/indigenous>.

In this 21st century, there has been several development concerning dwindling interests in the Igbo language as a first language by some of the indigenes who should uphold their language. UNESCO says that the Igbo language faces the risk of possible extinction in the next 50 years. Some scholars have drawn attention to the fact that Igbo language is a language in danger. For example, Kuju (1999:55) in Igboanusi (2006) makes the following observation:

It is not only the so called minority or small languages that are endangered in Nigeria. Even the rich also cry. Of late, there has been an increasing outcry by concerned Igbo indigenes that the Igbo language is registering fewer and fewer speakers. The Phenomenon is noticeable even among the Igbo resident in Igbo towns and cities where ordinarily, Igbo should be the chief means of communication.

Igboanusi (2014:449); in his own view states that the dominance of English and the low value with which Igbo is rated and the bane of the Igbo language in schools in turn leads to the trend to bring up children as monolingual speakers of English.

Indigenous languages have much role to play in sustaining national development. In the words of McCarthy (2003) in Adeyemi (2012), research conducted in the field of linguistics, anthropology and cognitive psychology unequivocally state that students who enter schools with a primary language other than the national or dominant language perform significantly better on academic tasks when they receive consistent and cumulative academic support in the native heritage language. Experiences from Philippine, Mexico, Wales, Canada, Russia, Yugoslavia, Japan and China have proved that the indigenous languages which Igbo is one of them are fit for

all levels of education as effective means of instruction that is capable of eliminating pedagogical difficulties in learning, enhancing better understanding and in the long run promote sustainable development if well implemented. Thus, the above assertion supports the need to revitalize indigenous languages and Igbo language in particular for sustainable development. Emeka-Nwobia (2015:114) rightly opines that “a nation is best developed by the way the language that best portrays its ideology is used.

Research Methodology

Ten homes were randomly selected from Owerri municipal in Imo state and Item in Bende Local Government Area of Abia state. Total numbers of twenty homes were used for data collection. Children used were between the ages of 7 to 12. Ten simple sentences in Igbo were structured; all in question forms, the children were expected to read and answer each question orally and in written forms in Igbo. Their responses and written forms were analyzed using the intergenerational language transmission table to ascertain the degree of intergenerational language transmission in both areas.

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

Knowing a language means having the capacity to produce sounds that signify certain meanings and to understand or interpret the sounds produced by others. Humans in all their activities in life employ language in every facet of life. Language can serve as a vehicle through which nations can rise to global recognition. It is a tool for communication. Bewaji (2002) sees language as “a central interactive process”. He identifies four ways by which language is used in the society, namely as a means of expression, for the purposes of record, to set matter in motion and as an instrument of thinking. This is why Rezvan (2008) describes language as a process of thought... and great manifestation of thought that once acquired helps to develop cognition and later on enhances higher intellectual functioning. Eyisi (2000) in her own view opines that every conceivable human activity revolves around language. She narrates that we use language to express love, hatred, anger, happiness, praise, satisfaction and dissatisfaction, to comment on the political, social, educational or economic situation in the country, to confirm or express religious beliefs, to comment on the weather and even to fill a vacuum when there is nothing else to do especially in the exchange of pleasantries. Language is the bedrock of social interaction and social harmony without which no meaningful economic development can be attained. Olaoye (2013), states that language is a catalyst in educational development; which is an important index of national development. It is the most important tool for youth empowerment. Language is a viable means for the upliftment of the underprivileged, marginalized, uninformed or illiterates in the society. One of the millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that runs through the National Economic Empowerment and development Strategy (NEEDS) by the past administration which is designed to engender sustainable change in democratic governance is carried out through education and language is the tool for doing this.

Language exists to convey information and also to condition our thoughts in a positive and constructive way. It is therefore pertinent to state that no business enterprise or corporate body can be effectively run without the positive contribution of language.

Indigenous Language

Indigenous language is the language that is native to a region and spoken by indigenous people of the same cultural value and belief. It is a local means of communication between members of a people or community which contains wisdom of the people or community. It helps the child in his/her mental, moral and emotional development. Rezvan (2008:13) supports the above statement by stating that “when the child masters his/her mother tongue through interacting with others, language helps in intellectual functioning”. Thought leads way to language, then language leads way to thought as well and the circle continues throughout the life of an individual.

According to Ramlatu (2014:11), indigenous languages are the tribal, native or local language spoken by the people. The language would be from a linguistically distinct community that has been settled in the area for many generations. There are about 500 indigenous languages in Nigeria and only few of these languages have written forms (Adeniyi and Bello 2006 in Ramlatu 2014). Bamgbose (1992) in Abidogun and Adebule (2005) maintains that the indigenous languages in Nigeria are 513 in number. Despite these numbers of indigenous languages in Nigeria, only three languages namely Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are national languages. They are being neglected and are mostly restricted to their domains or regions of use notwithstanding their status as the national language. Many of the indigenous languages around the world are in danger notwithstanding their numerous works. This is why United Nations declared 2019 as the year of indigenous languages in order to raise awareness of them, not only to benefit the people who speak these languages, but also for others to appreciate the important contribution they make to our world’s rich cultural diversity. This idea is a right step in a right direction.

Research results in the field of education, linguistics, anthropology and cognitive psychology are unequivocal that students who enter school with a primary language other than the national or dominant language perform significantly better on academic tasks when they receive consistent and cumulative academic support in the native heritage language (McCarty, 2003 in Adeyemi 2012). Many scholars agree that indigenous language when used in instructional purpose, is capable of enhancing cognitive understanding and removing pedagogical barrier in learning thereby enhancing sustainable development.

The adoption of English language as the official language of Nigeria is impacting negatively on the growth of many indigenous languages in Nigeria. In many homes now, English language has taken over as mother tongue. Parents speak English to their kids as first language. Even in most schools English is their media of instruction.

Empirical Review

Adeyemi (2012) did a research on indigenous languages and techno-scientific development. He explores how an often neglected cultural element, such as language could be developed, scientificized and used effectively with dominant European languages in Africa polity. Various researches conducted in education, communication and psychology that prove the role of indigenous languages in knowledge acquisition, enhancing cognitive understanding and also removing pedagogical barriers in learning were analysed. He moreover advocates that indigenous languages should be officially approved, adopted accordingly as classroom media with consequential provision of scientific books.

Rezvan(2008) did a study on mother tongue, a necessary step to intellectual development. The research focused on the important contribution of mother tongue to children learning through the process of cognitive development using Piaget and Vygotsky's views for investigation. When children are learning through their mother tongue, they are learning concepts and intellectual skills that are equally relevant to their ability to function in their entire life. He also states that supporting development of the mother tongue enhances the development of the second language.

Hermes and King (2013) work on Ojibwe language revitalization, multimedia technology, and family language learning. They examine how urban Ojibwe participants utilize computer-based language learning technology with their families at home. How a particular multimedia tool might jumpstart communication in the Ojibwe language at home was investigated. Families were regularly video-taped using the software and participated in weekly audio- video recorded interviews regarding their language use and learning. Finding suggests that technology-based language learning was incorporated into existing family dynamics and was helpful in providing a starting point for learning and language use within established extended networks. Technology allows communities to rapidly create and distribute language materials and resources.

Agwu (2016) worked on language as a vehicle for sustainable development. She states that language permeates every aspect of life; harmony and disharmony in life is derived from proper use or misuse of language. A languageless society would be a meaningless and underdeveloped society devoid of meaningful existence, a society of disorder, anarchy, hopelessness and helplessness. She is equally of the view that language is the most essential tool that can bring development in the economic, social and environmental life of the people of any nation in this 21st century. Language helps to develop the mind, assess, appraise, evaluate and understand both self, government and the governed.

Ramlatu (2014) researches on transformation of Nigeria through indigenous language education. The paper aimed at showing the importance of indigenous languages in the development and transformation of a nation. Nations like Germany, China and Russia were able to develop because they did not neglect their indigenous languages. She further states that the active participation and use of indigenous languages by the people have not been considered very important in the transformation agenda. The educational language policy should be enforced; the

learning and use of these languages should not stop at primary level but continue up to the tertiary level.

Igbo Language in the 21st Century

Sallabank(2010:65) quoting Calvet (1998:75) opines that “when the children object to speaking a language, gradually forget it or pretend to have forgotten it because they are ashamed of it, its future is much less assured”. This is the situation of Igbo language in this era. We shall use UNESCO’s language vitality and endangerment framework which is shown in table I to ascertain the position of Igbo language concerning degree of endangerment and the need for revitalization processes. It establishes six degrees of vitality/endangerment based on nine factors. The most salient factor is that of intergenerational transmission: whether or not a language is used in the family. This factor is generally accepted as the ‘gold standard’ of language vitality (Fishman 1991).

Degree of Endangerment	Intergenerational Language Transmission
Safe	Language is spoken by all generations; intergenerational transmission is uninterrupted
Vulnerable	Most Children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domain (e.g at home).
Definitely endangered	Children no longer learn the language as mother tongue.
Severely endangered	Language is spoken by grandparents and older generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves.
Critically endangered	The youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently.
Extinct	There is no speaker left.

Table I UNESCO’s Language Vitality and Endangerment Frameworks

In most cities (Owerri in particular) in the Igbo land, most parents do not speak the language to their children. In this case, children in these areas no longer acquire Igbo language as their first language which is mother tongue rather, they speak English and those who do not come from elite families speak pidgin in order to belong. Based on the area of our research, it will be concluded that Igbo language is in between definitely endangered and severely endangered in urban areas because most children do not learn the language as mother tongue while almost all the parents

speak but do not pass it to their children. In the rural areas, Igbo language is safe because intergenerational transmission is uninterrupted.

Government control and educational subjugation are the major causes of Igbo language endangerment. In the 2013 National Policy on education, it was only the first three years in the primary schools that the government states that the medium of instruction shall be the language of the immediate environment, in monolingual communities while English shall be taught as subject. While from the fourth year, English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of the immediate environment and French and Arabic shall be taught as subject. The NPE does not favour indigenous languages. Nobody or school even implement the first three years in primary schools which the NPE stipulates for the language of the immediate environment to be used for instruction and those in authority are not doing anything to reinforce it. In the secondary schools, our indigenous languages are no more in the compulsory cross-cutting subjects. This is a very big neglect to our language from those in authority and need to be reversed. Ramlatu(2014:12) rightly observes that:

Language and Literacy are very crucial for societal development. A society develops into modernity when its citizens are literate in the language of the masses... Historically, the jump towards expanded knowledge production and reproduction in societies has only been possible when the languages of social majorities have been centrally placed.

He continues by quoting Mazrui and Mazrui (2002) which opines that no nation can develop without the use of its native languages.

Experiences from Philippine, Mexico, China, Wales, Canada, Russia, Yugoslavia and Japan have shown that the indigenous languages are fit for all levels of education as effective means of instruction that is capable of eliminating pedagogical difficulties in learning and thereby enhancing better understanding. Different researches have also proven that students who enter schools with a primary language other than the national or dominant language perform significantly better on academic tasks when they receive consistent and communicative academic support in the native

heritage language. When used as instructional purpose, many scholars have contended that it is capable of enhancing cognitive understanding and removing pedagogical barrier in learning (Ramlatu 2014).

Government through the policy on education has really raised the status of English because the knowledge and proficiency on English is a requirement for assessing white collar job and transaction of official functions. The dignified position of English in the development of Nigeria has downgraded the native languages to the background. If conscious effort is not made to redress the situation, Nigeria may lose its linguistic identity and this may be why the country is not progressing.

Some Igbo people's negative attitudes toward their language emanates from viewing the language as being inferior. This could be why most Igbo parents do not speak the language to their children. In the university, students look down on their counterparts who are studying Igbo language and even make mockery of them being in the university as waste of time. The negative attitude was created because of the position the government placed English language as the official language. Some parents prevent their child from speaking Igbo because they see Igbo as not being a global language. Chinese is being learned in Nigeria schools today because of the effort of the owners of the language to propagate their language. For any indigenous language to rise up to global recognition there must be a huge commitment and investment from the owners of that language.

As it is now, it will be difficult to find an Igbo person counting money in the language, in spite of the fact that their equivalent exist in the language. Igbo people have their own forms of greeting but most people do not care to greet in Igbo.

Notwithstanding all these shortcomings, there are still Igbo elites who uphold their language. They speak it, write it and communicate with it. People in the rural areas also speak Igbo. Some Igbos who due to economic and prestige reasons taught their children English as first language now regret not teaching Igbo to their children.

Indigenous Languages for Sustainable Development

The term “development” is a dynamic concept that has received varying interpretations and explanations among authors, scholars and researchers in the developing nations. Development ranges from growth in education that is intellectual growth, politics, economy, science and technology. In educational process, language is the main pillar through which man has to plan, instruct and evaluate programmes. According to Topadro and Smith (2011), development is the process of improving the quality of all human lives and capacity by raising people’s standard of living, self-esteem and freedom. The development of individuals in respect of their aspiration in the society means development of the nation (Olaoye 2013).

Science and Technology can be acquired and better understood through the indigenous languages. Olaoye (2013:750) rightly observes;

For indigenous languages to be used for the teaching and learning of science and technology, these mother tongues need to be developed in terms of their orthographies, spelling and vocabulary reform, including syntactical simplification, and translation through the use of lexicographic strategies and the linguistic indigenization policy of borrowing, coinage, semantic extension etc. Through these Linguistic re-engineering processes, our indigenous languages will become a veritable vector of technological advancement.

Some indigenous languages in Nigeria, mostly the three major ones namely Igbo Hausa and Yoruba in particular have perfectly gone through most of the above processes. This means that they are well equipped to be used as medium of instruction. It is hardly possible to talk of development without including the language with which the people formulate their thoughts. According to Ramlatu (2004:12), ‘Linguistic development is the first step towards any other meaningful and desirable development’. For example, scientific and technological development cannot be attained by a people who have not developed linguistically.

Development not sustained may be as good as development retarded or failed. Sustainable development as a concept matters to individuals, communities, nations and the world at large. It should be able to meet the needs of today without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs. It is mainly through the use of indigenous language that social, economic, environmental and cultural development can reach the majority of the population who are in the rural areas. Language has crucial role in the mobilization of the rural population for national development programs and projects such as agriculture, peace building, family planning, home craft, drugs etc. Through the use of indigenous languages, societal ills will be corrected easily thereby achieving a high rate of development. According to Adeyemi (2012:3):

Africans are not getting the theories right... the so-called language of science in many African countries is colonial, foreign language, English, French, Portuguese etc. The mother tongue despite its proven ability in enhancing cognitive understanding is not prioritized in learning.

Language Revitalization vis a vis Sustainable Development

The best ways of revitalizing a language is through the community initiatives, commitment and investment. The community should initiate programs such as forming voluntary activist groups that will raise awareness through activities such as festivals and performances to buttress the necessity of raising children with mother tongue particularly in urban areas. This is called prestige planning. This will eventually make the parents to value their languages and start to communicate with their children in the language. When this happens, everybody and no more a group of people can converse in the language and formulate strategies and developmental ideologies for the development of the nation. It is argued that not all developmental ideas can be adequately expressed, conveyed and implemented without the application of our indigenous language.

Government involvement is also crucial in order to restructure the education policy to favour indigenous language and also sees to the proper implementation of those policies. Government also needs to provide fund for the revitalization process. There should be the documentation of developmental policies in the local languages in other to

reach the rural populace who will in turn put in their efforts in order to reach the desired goals.

The revitalization and maintenance of indigenous language should be done by using languages, information and communication technologies where necessary in order to improve everyday use of the languages and encourage best practice, equality and proficiency in use. According to Olaoye (2013:750), ‘science and technology can be acquired and better understood through the indigenous languages’. For indigenous languages to be used for the teaching and learning of science and technology, they need to be developed in terms of the orthographies spelling and vocabulary reform, including modernization.

Empowering the indigenous children, young people and adults to have access to education, information and knowledge in their native language will be the utmost concern. This will help to improve data collection and sharing of information in and about the native languages, using language technology and other communication and information mechanisms. Despite technological progress, many indigenous people experience a variety of barriers to access information in cyber space, using mobile phones, personal computers etc. in their own languages at schools, work place or public domain.

Recommendations

- The policy position on the use of mother tongue as medium of instruction for the first three years of childhood education should be extended to six years in primary school and the implementation should be forced.
- School administrators and teachers should stop the “no speaking of vernacular” syndrome and encourage students to speak their mother tongue.
- Those in authority should reverse indigenous languages as compulsory subject in senior secondary certificate examination as it was before.
- The use of language, information and communication technologies in the teaching and learning of indigenous languages should be added to the curriculum in order to make it appetizing to the youths and children.

Conclusion

In this work, indigenous languages have been established as catalyst for sustainable development in this 21st century. Most of these indigenous languages are in danger due to the neglect of the owners and the unfavourable education policy of the government. There is every need to revitalize indigenous languages since there are proofs that countries which use their mother tongue for instruction purpose perform far better than their counterparts. Incorporation of language, information and communication technologies are necessary in order to improve everyday indigenous languages use. Thus, Egwuonwu-Chimezie (2016:10) rightly observes that the future of the indigenous languages partly depend on the media since the 21st century children are surrounded with media channels which they engage with in almost all their activities. Information is power and perception can be changed by access to media.

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