AWKA JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERARY STUDIES (AJELLS)

Volume 11 Number 1
July, 2024

An Evaluation of the Use of Igbo Language for Communication among Residents of South-East Nigeria

Christian E. C. Ogwudile
Department of Igbo, African and Communication Studies
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
cec.ogwudile@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

There is no doubt about the fact that the most fundamental avenue to sustain a language and save it from extinction is by using it as a language of communication. This implies that one needs to be speaking such language in his/her daily interactions with fellow speakers. The refusal to speak a given language jeopardizes or threatens the continuous existence of such language. It was on the above premise that this study was carried out to investigate Igbo language usage as a means of communication with focus on the residents of South-East Nigeria. The survey research method was utilised for the study while questionnaire was employed as data collection instrument. A sample of 381 people was drawn from the total population while the multi stage sampling technique was as well deployed for the study. It was found out that the Igbo language is going into extinction as the Igbos now prefer to interact in English language even among one another. It was consequently recommended that parents, Igbo traditional leaders, Igbo cultural institutions and organisations as well as the governments of the states in the South-East, should take concrete actions in preserving and promoting the Igbo language which is one of the major indicators of the Igbo identity.

Keywords: Igbo, Language, Communication, South-East, Extinction.

Introduction

One of the core indicators of the identity of a society is the language of such society. Language is a very fundamental part of a society's culture. It is the unique means through which members of the society communicate. It is utilised by speakers to exchange ideas or send messages. It facilitates communication and makes speakers unique in their interactions. The implication is that language is no doubt very relevant in any society.

The importance of language to human beings for expression cannot be over emphasized. It is a means of communicating values, beliefs and customs (Ogwudile, 2014). Language is the method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way. It is a system of communication used by a particular country or community to express one's mind, feelings and emotions. Language is generally defined as a system with which social groups co-operate and interact, which helps in the formation of thoughts and feelings (Onwubie, 2016).

Language, which is made up of words and sentences, is used to express ideas and thoughts. In most cases, ideas and thoughts are expressed without sounding the words of a language but through signs and symbols whose meanings would be decoded still using the conventional language of communication. Yet, the different contexts where we communicate determine the language we use. Sometimes, we decide to use it directly to reveal the relationship between what is said and what is meant or we use it indirectly leaving the listener or reader to deduce or infer the intended meaning (Okeke & Chukwu, 2013).

One crucial kind of language is the indigenous language. It is the kind of language that originated in a specific place and was not brought to that place from elsewhere. It is an autochthonous language that is native to a region and spoken by natives of the

area in question (Ogwudile, 2014). Indigenous language is a language that is native to a region and spoken by indigenous people. The language would be from a linguistically distinct community that has been settled in the area for many generations (Wikipedia, the free Encyclopaedia). It is the language a particular group of people occupying an area utilise to communicate within themselves which is passed from generation to another. They are famously known of such language by other communities around them (Onwubie, 2016).

Indigenous language is synonymous with native language, mother tongue and first language, a language that is original to a people, native to a locality and part of its culture is considered to be an indigenous language. In this regard, any language that can be located in a country having a speech community and speakers, is an indigenous language. Indigenous language can be summed up as the language of a particular group; the mother tongue which is acquired and not learnt. It belongs to the owners of the group. It is not learnt as a second language (L2) by them. It is the Language into which they are born and they do not require another person to teach it to them except one who knows it and speaks the language as well. (Anumudu, 2014; Adeniyi and
Richard, 2006; Onwubie, 2016)

In Nigeria, numerous indigenous languages are in existence. One of such is the Igbo language. Though, according to Ogwudile (2014), there are over 300 indigenous languages in Nigeria, Igbo language is one of the three predominant ones in the country. The language is spoken by natives of the South-East Nigeria (Enugu, Imo, Abia, Anambra and Ebonyi States) as well as some parts of Rivers and Delta States in South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The Igbo language is expressed in virtually all aspects of the Igbo land.

Igbo language has evolved since some thousands of years ago. It is the main language spoken by the estimated 20 million Igbo of South-East Nigeria. The Igbo people of Nigeria are the indigenous people of the five states of the South-East Nigeria: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo and parts of Delta and Rivers States. The Igbo are by nature mercantilistic, migratory, adaptive and inventive. Because of this, there is huge population of Igbo in all the 36 states of Nigeria. There is also a good presence of Igbo in most parts of the world where they are engaged in academics, businesses or a combination of the two. The language permeates all aspects of their culture: music, marriage, religion, craft, education and social interactions especially in conversation. The beauty of the language is often expressed when elders are locked in hearty discussion, debate and music. In such occasions, linguistic devices like proverbs, idioms, anecdotes and folktales are freely used to the enjoyment of listeners. The mastery and use of these linguistic devices by speakers manifest their oratorical prowess and in the Igbo society, people with such soapbox erudition in the use of the language are held in high esteem. In inter-village engagements like marriage, land disputes, such orators often represent their villages (Ekwueme, 2011).

The arrival of the British colonial masters in Nigeria seems to have set the way for the declining fortune of the Igbo language. During colonisation, the colonial masters were so much aware of the power of language in the colonisation process that they introduced the English language to the Anglophone colonies and did everything possible to teach, promote and sustain the language at the expense of local/indigenous languages. Through its rude interference, many African indigenous languages suffered neglect, suppression and retrogression. This happened because "colonial mentality" made people to perceive the English language as a status symbol, language of elites, the highly educated and respected, the most enlightened and leaders of today and tomorrow (Ifejirika, 2014).

During period of colonization which was before 1960, the colonizing territory takes over the resources, labour and markets of the colonised territory and may even impose their socio-cultural, religious and linguistic structures on the conquered population, a situation known as cultural imperialism. Hence, one of the most enduring legacies of British colonisation of Nigeria is the overwhelming influence of their language – English language, on Nigerian people especially the Igbo language (Peter, 2006) cited in (Ekwueme, 2011).

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 the 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. Most of the languages facing extinction lack that capacity to fulfil the needs of man in an age of breath-taking science and technology, when every man and woman wants to be part of the advances and prosperity (Prince-Education, 2009).

Statement of the Research Problem

The Igbo language is one of the three predominant languages in Nigeria. The other two are the Yoruba and Hausa Languages. However, the continued existence of the Igbo Language seems to be threatened because of the increasing lack of interest in the language among native speakers. Since English Language is the official language in Nigeria, more attention seems to be given to it than the indigenous languages. Many schools frown at speaking any other language other than English. Even at the homes of many elites in the society, English Language seems to be most preferred

language of interaction among their families. In this regard, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Advisory Committee on Language
Pluralism and Multi-language Education predicted that Igbo language and by implication, culture, may be heading for extinction, and subsumed by other stronger Nigerian languages by 2025, if nothing is done, by its speakers (Abanobi, 2012). The above prediction is without base as 2025 is almost around the corner and there is no sign of Igbo Language going into extinction.

There is no doubt about the fact that the most fundamental avenue to sustain a language and save it from extinction is by using it as a language of communication. This implies that one needs to be speaking such language in his/her daily interactions with fellow speakers. The refusal to speak a language jeopardizes or threatens the continuous existence of such language. The implication of the above is that preventing the Igbo language from going into extinction requires the speakers to among other things interact/communicate using the language. It was sequel to the above that the researcher investigated the use of Igbo language as a means of communication among the residents of South-East Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study was to investigate the use of Igbo language as a means of communication among the residents of South-East Nigeria. The study specifically sought to:

1. Ascertain the frequency at which the residents of South-East Nigeria use the Igbo language as a means of communication.
2. Determine the major constraint to the use of Igbo language as a means of communication among the residents of South-East Nigeria.

.

Significance of the Study

This study shall serve as a valuable reference document for further studies in this area of knowledge. This implies that researchers who desire to engage in further exploration of this area of study will find this study very helpful in their explorations. This study shall also be relevant to all the promoters of Igbo language as it will help them to know the level at which *ndi Igbo* (Igbo people) are utilizing the Igbo language in their conversations. The implication is that the study shall serve as feedback mechanism to Igbo language promoters. Institutions of higher learning shall find this study relevant in the teaching and learning of indigenous language and communication.

Research Questions

In line with the objectives of the study, the researcher addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the frequency at which the residents of South-East Nigeria use the Igbo language as a means of communication?
2. What is the major constraint to the use of Igbo language as a means of communication among the residents of South-East Nigeria?

Literature Review

Igbo language cannot be more important than its speakers' value on it. In other words, it is the speakers of Igbo language, (that is the Igbo people), that can determine how important Igbo language becomes. If they have a positive attitude toward Igbo language, Igbo will be important and vice versa. There are certain factors that cause Igbo people to have negative attitude toward their language. Some of these factors include among others: education, government language policies and globalization (Odinye & Odinye, 2015).

The Igbo language is supposed to be the most powerful tool to which Igbo citizens think, create, aspire, desire, feel and express

their enlarged mental horizon and fulfil that which man is capable of in his language. Igbo people, as a race, are supposed to be very proud of their language, but the reverse is becoming the case (Ogwudile, 2014).

The introduction of the English language by the colonial masters as a facilitating agent of colonialism produced multifarious challenges to African vernacular languages. It did not only dwarf and dominate the local languages but also introduced other variants of itself in a bid to have direct communication with Africans. Through its influence, the pidgin variety of English and what some language scholars call Engli-Igbo (code-mixing) emerged in Igbo language community. The effect of this is the steady suppression, and deterioration of the Igbo language. The situation has come to a height where Igbo leaders and elder statesmen express fears that the Igbo language would go into extinction within a foreseeable future. (Agbo & Chukwuma, 2017).

The earliest set of people to learn the English language laid the foundation for the troubles the Igbo language is facing till date. Instead of using the language only when communicating with the Whites, these 'notables' literally refused to speak their native language even when discussing with their aged parents and in the villages. In order to show off their new status (English language proficiency), they would, for instance, while interacting with their people, let off salvoes of jaw-breaking (often incorrect) grammar to the amazement and admiration of these illiterate villagers. This arbitrary use of the language made it to become a challenge for people to send their children to school to learn the 'Oyibo' man's language, if only to counter the arrogance of those who had already acquired it. As more and more of them learnt the language, Igbo language thus began to slide (Ekwueme, 2011).

In not so distant past, conscious efforts were made by some parents, classroom teachers, some members of the society and

class prefects in some Nigerian secondary schools not only to suppress the Igbo language but if possible, to kill the language completely. For example, the English language was at the point under review made the sole means of communication in schools and colleges. School debates were regularly organized to encourage the learners to think and speak in the English language and good prizes were given to the best speakers of the language. On the other hand, class prefects, and hostel spies were nominated to write the names of unfortunate students who spoke Igbo language in the classroom, hostels, bathrooms, churches and playgrounds. Any student caught in the "deadly act" of speaking Igbo would face physical punishment such as flogging, hard labour or the payment of fine or both. This was discouraging enough. Similarly, students who opted to choose Igbo language as a core undergraduate course were openly discouraged on the grounds that the subject has no academic prestige. In addition, the few teachers who opted to teach Igbo language were heavily mocked because they were involved in the teaching of "Igbo – Igbo BK." That is, the teachers were lowly rated, and Igbo graduates were without any job prospects in relation to courses like law, medicine, pharmacy and engineering among others. (Agbo & Chukwuma, 2017).

Some Igbo parents especially the literate ones do not speak Igbo to their children even at home. In some cases, the parents ban their children from using Igbo to communicate among themselves. It is these kinds of parents that constitute problem to Igbo language because it gives them joy when their children can speak English language fluently at the expense of their mother tongue (Eme, 2004). Nwadike (2008) noted bitterly that, "many Igbo parents do not want their children to speak Igbo. Once, a mother who teaches at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, asked her children to desist from speaking that useless language, [Igbo]. This class of parents get offended with teachers who teach Igbo as a subject to the children". In recognition of the declining fortune of the Igbo

language, Odinye and Odinye (2015) note that we can save the Igbo language from extinction if we do the following:

- Love Igbo language and culture
- Have interest in saving Igbo language.
- Speak Igbo language at all times.
- Encourage the younger generation to learn Igbo language
- Provide scholarships for students and teachers of Igbo Language.
- Use Igbo language in media: radio, television and newspapers.
- Make Igbo language a compulsory subject for admission into higher institution in Igboland.
- Pass a bill to encourage the use of Igbo language in government of Igboland.
- Encourage the reading of Igbo written materials at churches, schools, homes, etc.
- Discourage people especially the younger generation from speaking English and other languages.

A number of studies have been done in this area of knowledge. Okoli (2015) did a study entitled "The use of indigenous languages for Interactions in Nigeria". The study revealed among the three dominant languages in Nigeria, native speakers of the Igbo language rarely interact among themselves using the language. Similarly, A study carried out by Lawson (2014) revealed that the Ikwerre speaking natives of Rivers State most frequently communicate among themselves in English language than their native language.

Another study carried out by Njoku 2015) showed that factors such as inadequate knowledge, shyness in speaking the native language, and preference for English language are factors that prevent Nigerians from speaking their native languages. However, preference of English was seen as the major impediment to the use

of indigenous language as the language of communication. In a related study, Egwu (2015) found that the natives of Imo State rarely speak the Igbo language because of their love, interest and preference for English language.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on the cultural marginalization theory of language. This theory explains a situation where indigenous populations, in order to achieve a higher social status, adopt the cultural and linguistic traits of a people who have come to dominate them through colonisation, conquest, or invasion. This is the most common cause of language endangerment. When the people gradually neglect and refuse to promote official and unofficial communication dynamics in their language, consciously or unconsciously, they are culturally marginalizing their language (Johnmary, 2012). In line with this study, *ndi Igbo* would be marginalizing the Igbo language if they decide to most frequently use the English language as their language of communication at the expense of their native language (Igbo language).

Methodology

The Survey research method was used to carry out the study while questionnaire and interview guide served as the measuring instruments. The residents of the five states in South-East Nigeria constituted the population of the study. The states are Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States. A projected figure of 21,078,834 was used as the population of the study from where a sample size of 381 was drawn using the Taro Yamane's sample size determination formula. While the questionnaire was used to collect data from the 400 respondents who constituted the sample size, the interview guide was used to collect data from five (5) key informants who provided further details that could not be provided using the questionnaire.

The Purposive sampling technique was used to select a local government area from each of the five states as well as the individual who responded. The LGAs which were studied were purposively selected on the basis that the researcher sees them as threat areas. Threat areas are the places within the Igboland where the existence of Igbo language is threatened, probably because of the development of such places which has led to the influx of non-speakers, thereby jeopardizing the use of Igbo language for interactions in such places probably, making the residents of the areas to communicate more in English. Studies such as Odinye and Odinye, (2015), Okeke and Chukwu, (2015) as well as Onwubie, (2016) all support the above claims. In Enugu State, Enugu-North, Enugu-South and Enugu-East LGAs were studied.

In Abia State, Umuahia-North, Umuahia-South and Aba-North LGAs were selected. In Anambra State, Anewi-North, Awka-South, and Onitsha-North LGAs were studied. In Imo State, Owerri-North, Owerri-West, as well as Owerri Municipal LGAs were studied while in Ebonyi State, LGAs studied were Abakaliki, Afikpo-North and Afikpo-South. The researcher used the purposive sampling technique to ensure only the natives of South-East Nigeria were studied. This implies that the purposive sampling technique was used to administer the questionnaire on the respondents.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Here, the collected quantitative and qualitative data were carefully presented for the purpose of clarity. The quantitative data collected were collated, presented and analysed using tables and simple percentages. This was carefully done in such manner that readers will easily understand the analysis of data. Out of the 400 copies of questionnaire administered, 2 were not returned. The respondents could not locate where they were kept and there was no enough time to re-administer the questionnaire on them) while 398 copies

were returned. The researcher therefore made use of the returned 398 copies.

Table 1: Frequency at which the residents of South-East Nigeria use the Igbo language for Communication

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Regularly	31	7.78%
Occasionally	357	89.69%
Barely	6	1.3%
Don't use it for communication	0	0%
Not sure	4	1%
Total	398	100%

Table one above shows that majority of the respondents occasionally use the Igbo language as a means of communication.

Table 2: The major constraint to the use of Igbo language as a means of communication among the residents of South-East Nigeria

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Inadequate knowledge of Igbo language	113	28.9%
Perception of Igbo language as inferior	55	13.81%
Preference of English over Igbo language	217	54.52%
Lack of interest in speaking Igbo language	9	2.26%
Not sure	4	1%
Total	398	100%

Table two above shows that the preference of English over Igbo and the inadequate knowledge of Igbo language among respondents constitute major constraints to the use of the language as a means of communication among respondents

.

Interview Question: Make some statements purely in Igbo language without mixing it with English

Interviewee 1: That would be difficult. I am used to blending both

Interviewee 2: I need to first organize it in my head before saying them. For now, I can't
Interviewee 3: I am not fluent to that extent. English would have to come at intervals
Interviewee 4: This is hard. I can't speak so much in purely Igbo
Interviewee 5: No, I would make so much mistakes
The implication of the responses above is that the interviewees cannot make statements in Igbo languages without mixing them up with English.

Discussion of Findings

Here, all the findings were discussed to provide more insights for clearer understanding of the results.

Research Question One: What is the frequency at which the residents of South-East Nigeria use the Igbo language as a means of communication?

The aim of the researcher here was to ascertain the frequency to which respondents use the Igbo language as a means of communication. Data collected and presented on table 1 above were used to answer this research question. The data reveal that 31 respondents representing 7.78% regularly communicate using Igbo language, 357 respondents constituting 89.69% occasionally interact in Igbo language, 6 respondents constituting 1.5% barely communicate using Igbo language, while 4 respondents representing 1% were not sure of the frequency at which they interact in Igbo language. This means that majority of the respondents occasionally use the Igbo language as a means of communication.

Giving credence to the above finding, Okoli (2015) did a study entitled "The use of indigenous languages for Interactions in Nigeria". The study revealed among the three dominant languages in Nigeria, native speakers of the Igbo language rarely interact among themselves using the language. Similarly, a study carried out by Lawsom (2014) revealed that the Ikwerre speaking natives

most frequently communicate among themselves in English language than their native language.

Research Question Two: What is the major constraint to the use of Igbo language as a means of communication among the residents of South-East Nigeria?

The researcher raised this research question to ascertain the major constraint in using the Igbo language for communication. Data generated and presented on table two above, were used to answer this research question. The data show that 113 respondents constituting 28.39% do not have adequate knowledge of the Igbo language, 55 respondents constituting 13.81% perceive Igbo language as an inferior language, 217 respondents representing 54.52% prefer to communicate in English than Igbo, respondents representing 2.26% don't have interest in Igbo language while 4 respondents constituting 1% were not sure of their major constraint. This means that the preference of English over Igbo and the inadequate knowledge of Igbo language among respondents constitute major constraints to the use of the language as a means of communication among respondents.

In line with the above finding, a study carried out by Njoku (2015) showed that factors such as inadequate knowledge, shyness in speaking the native language, and preference for English language are factors that prevent Nigerians from speaking their native languages. However, preference of English was seen as the major impediment to the use of indigenous language as the language of communication. In a related study, Egwu (2015) found that the natives of Imo State rarely speak the Igbo language because of their love for English language.

Summary of Findings

At the end of the study, the researcher found that:

1. Respondents rarely use Igbo language as means of Communication.

2. Preference for English language as well as lack of adequate knowledge of the Igbo language constituted major constraints to respondents' use of Igbo language as a means of communication.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher concludes that the Igbo language is sliding towards extinction. It was heart-breaking for the researcher to discover that respondents could not even properly communicate in Igbo language. Most of the respondents could not make a complete statement in Igbo language without code-switching or code-mixing with the English language. This is another confirmation to UNESCO's prediction that Igbo language and by implication, culture, may be heading for extinction, and subsumed by other stronger Nigerian languages by 2025, if nothing is done, by its speakers. The researcher disagrees with UNESCO's prediction. This is because Igbo language has a lot of speakes and writers and so far it has all these, it's extinction is not possible. It is being spoken and written by both old and young in Igbo land. Moreso, 2025 is almost around the corner and there is no sign of Igbo Language going into extinction.

Recommendations

Sequel to the findings of the study, the researcher recommends thus;

1. *Ndi Igbo* should as a matter of necessity embrace the Igbo language and start significantly using it for interactions among themselves. They should understand that Igbo language represents their identity.
2. Parents, traditional leaders, cultural institutions and organisations as well as the governments of the states in Igbo land, should take concrete actions in preserving and promoting the Igbo language. They should herald increase knowledge and acceptance of Igbo language by engaging in various enlightenment campaigns and formulation of policies that will enhance the fortune of the language.

3. Future researchers should accommodate locations within the Igbo land (parts of Delta and Rivers States) that were not covered by this study to bring about an all-encompassing result.

References

Abanobi, C. (2012) "The Battle for Igbo Language", *Daily Sun,* 28th August. (2012B) "War in America! Woman Attacks Zebrudaya for Speaking Igbo to Her Kids", *Daily Sun,* 28th August. (2012C) "I'm in tears for Igbo Language", *Daily Sun,* 28th August.

Agbo, B. O. and Chukwuma, O. (2017). Perceptual influence of the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria's (FRCN) Igbo programmes on the promotion of Igbo language among residents of South-East Nigeria. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. 3(2); 11-21

Ekwueme, A. C. (2011). Mass media and the declining fortunes of indigenous languages: An appraisal of Igbo Language (1960- 2000). *Journal of Igbo Language & Linguistics*, (3),84-94.

Eme, C. A (2004). Improving Igbo Language use at Homes and Communities. *Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities. Vol. IV. September, 2004.* 302-313

Nwadike, I. U. (2008). Igbo language and culture: Winther bound? (Asusu na omenala Igbo: ije anaa?). In Umeasiegbu (ed.) Chief ogbalu memorial lectures (1&3). Onitsha: Varsity Publishers

Odinye, I. S. and Odinye, I. E. (2015). Preventing the Extinction of Igbo Language. Retrieved on 1st May, 2024 from: p://www.ajol.info/index.php/og/article/viewFile/57925/46291

Ogwudile, C. E. C. (2014). The Igbo language: A too for policy implementation and nation building. *Journal of Modern European Languages and Literatures*. 2. 106-120

Okeke, A. F. and Chukwu, U. K. (2015). Language use in

communication: a semiotic perspective on select Igbo cultural symbolic objects. *Ansu Journal of Language and Literary Studies*. 1(2). 120-138.

Onwubie, B. C. (2016). Indigenous language and the preservation of African values; the Igbo example. *Journal of Religion and Human Relations* 8(2). 230-238.

Ifejirika, E, (2014). You are "Dead" without your language: Allaying the fears that the Igbo language will go into extinction. *International Journal of Arts and Humanities, Bahi Dar, Ethiopia*, 3(2): 333-347.

Johnmary, A. K. (2012). UNESCO prediction on the extinction of Igbo Language in 2025: Analyzing societal violence and new transformative strategies. *Developing Country Journal*, 2(12): 110 - 118.

Peter, K. (2006). CIA acknowledges ties to Pinochet's repressive regime. Retrieved 26th September 2023, from: www.wikipedia.com

Prince Education (2009). "UNESCO'S alert on the world's language" in Retrieved on 23rd June, 2012, http://www.nigerianbestforum.com/blog/?p=12923.

Wikipedia.org, (2012) "Languages of Nigeria" in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_of_Nigeria. Retrieved on 3rd March, 2024.