SSN:978-978-48450-4-5 (Online & Print)
JMEL- Journal of Modern European Languages And Literatures Vol.2 July 2014

THE IGBO LANGUAGE: A TOOL FOR POLICY IMPLEMENTATION AND NATION BUILDING

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Abstract

The Igbo language is the indigenous language that is spoken by the Igbo race. This language in the recent times seems to be endangered due to lack of interest by the indigenes to use it for communication and business. It is very clear, without doubts, that the foreign languages (more especially English) and their policy implementations seem to subsume the indigenous language and so weakens the Igbo language in policy implementation and nation building. Languages are used for interactions, policy making and policy implementation, which are important ingredients in nation building. If the indigenous languages, more especially Igbo,are neglected and allowed to go into extinction in Nigeria, the native speaker will be forced to use English (a foreign language) in policy making and implementation. The objective of this study therefore, is to emphasize the effective use of our indigenous language (Igbo) among the native speakers to such extent that it can be used as an instrument in the making and implementation of policies and thus help in nation building. This objective is achieved through the review of some related literature and oral interviews.

Introduction

The importance of language to human beings for expression of policy and implementation of policies cannot be over emphasized. It is a means of communicating values, beliefs and customs. Indigenous language is a 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. The Igbo language is the indigenous language that is spoken by Igbo indigenes. Many indigenous languages in Africa are into extinction today and this could be traced to the colonial history of the States involved. The indigenous languages have been replaced with the colonist's

languages and culture. The foreign language was used as official language and language of instruction in schools. This is to the detriment of the indigenous languages.

It is this contact between Nigeria and the colonial masters that introduced the English Language into Nigeria. This foreign language and its culture were imbibed by the Igbo people. Policies were made and implemented in foreign languages instead of in indigenous languages. Later, the effect became adverse The foreign language was used even in homes by parents and children and wards resulting in near extinction of the Igbo language. Even in the absence of foreigners, in Igbo gatherings the use of the English language is preferable more especially as it has been erroneously believed to be a language of class Even those that are not well educated or not educated at all use pidgin English instead, to shy away from speaking Igbo. But the loss of one's language amounts to loss of one's identity.

Igbo indigenes no longer value their indigenous language and the parents strive to ensure that their children master and exclusively use the English Language. In schools, the medium of instruction is English thus alienating the child from his culture from a very early stage of identity and character formation. But when a child is taught in his indigenous language he feels at home in school. Obute supports the use of mother-tongue as a medium of instruction and agrees that literacy in one's mother tongue is vital to a person's identity and self esteem.(20) But in schools, children are fined and flogged for speaking the Igbo language in the class. What a shame! Language is the vehicle and effective way of communication and a means of transmitting or passing the culture of the people to the younger ones. The indigenous language plays this role better. The fundamental aim of education, among others, is to enable a society educate its children, improve and maintain its characteristic way of life and this, can be achieved if children from

a particular society learn in the language they are familiar with which is the indigenous language.

Learning the skills of literacy in the first language makes it easier to acquire speaking and literacy skills in a second, and gives people the confidence to participate more fully in the society. Fafunwa explains that the mother tongue policy which had been in Nigeria's statutes since 1925, was highlighted in 1977 and revised in 1981 but it had never been properly implemented through these years.(70) This implies that this position exists only on paper and it is not clear how the government intends to enforce it. What is stated therein is contrary to what operates in reality, in which English is still used as the medium of instruction. The medium of instruction in the primary school should be the mother tongue because the mother tongue is the child's contact with his home, family, village and town. The culture of his people is found in the child's own language. So it should be taught at its purest and best form so that the child can appreciate the literature, stories, songs and poems of his community and probably add his own contribution when he grows older.

Government policies are made and implemented in the foreign language, English. This makes it difficult or even impossible for the majority of people to understand; but if they are made and implemented in the indigenous language, the masses, even the uneducated would be carried along. The 7- point agenda of the president are in the foreign language and majority of Nigerians do not understand what they are all about. For that reason, those policies and their implementations for indigenes have no meaning and do not help in nation building.

There is a genuine truth that language policy and implementation as far as Igbo indigenous language is concerned has not yet taken off even in the pre-primary education level. For instance from the survey carried out recently in one of

the nursery schools in Enugu Urban (Enugu State), it was discovered that 99% of the classes use English as the medium of instruction and only 1% use Igbo mixed with English during Igbo lessons. This implies that the language policy is not yet in force in our nursery schools. These are applicable to both primary and secondary schools.

A lot of criticisms were made by many linguists and scholars on the provisions of the national Policy on Education. It was just a few of them that believe that the provisions made in the 1995 National Policy on education (revised edition) are better. A linguist like Emenanjo comments, "the vague, evasive and non committal phraseology of the language provision in the 1977 and 1981 version has now given way to a better and more pragmatic one in the 1995 version" (5). The bolder and more pragmatic provisions are:

i. Each Nigerian child will be required to learn one of the three major Nigerian languages other than his mother tongue.
ii. Government shall ensure that the medium of instruction in pre-primary education will be principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community.
iii. The medium of instruction in the first three years of the primary school shall be the mother tongue.
iv. Two Nigerian languages should be core subjects to be offered at the junior secondary school where the mother tongue or language of the immediate community is to be taught as L_1, if it has an orthography and literature.
v. One major Nigerian language other than the mother tongue or language of immediate community should be taught for communicative competence as L_2.

vi. A major Nigerian language should be one of the subjects in the core curriculum for senior secondary schools.

All the above policies were accepted as entrenched in the 1995 National Policy on Education. The question then is how far or to what extent has the above policies been implemented? The teachers, most of whom are Igbo, would not like to use Igbo as a medium of instruction at all. Instead they resort to punishing pupils or students that speak Igbo in their classes.

The Igbo people and their counterparts

The Igbo language is supposed to be the most powerful tool to which Igbo indigenes think, create, aspire, desire, feel and express their enlarged mental horizon and fulfill 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 the case.

On the other hand, their counterparts like Yoruba and Hausa, use their languages for effective communications among themselves. They speak it without minding, even in gatherings involving non speakers of these indigenous languages. Fraternity is achieved through language among other tribes but not among the Igbo who would prefer to greet his brother or sister in English and any other discussions will either be in English or its counterpart – pidgin. This is one of the reasons why the Hausa and Yoruba languages have gone so far in both speech and writing than the Igbo language.

The indigenous languages are the first identification parameters for the diverse tribes in Nigeria. So there has to be studies and intellectual discourse on the role of language and nation building if Igbo is to make progress. It is this natural endowment that the Igbo man uses to locate and identify his members in the global society. This helps to make way for healthy interaction.

Ajah recognizes the importance of indigenous language especially Igbo when he opines:

> Igbo language gained prominence during and after colonial rule. The language was among the first indigenous languages to be translated into black and white by the missionaries. The language became a major language among the people of old Eastern Region. The language was widely accepted among the people. The rate by which it spreads among the non tribe was like a fire burning in a dried bush. (35)

In view of the above, Igbo people should understand that no other language can identify them better than their God-given indigenous language. Igbo man's identity is his language and if he loses it, he has lost his identity, hence the necessity of sticking to and embracingone's language and being proud of it.

In the olden days, folktales were the effective methods of educating the Igbo children on the 'dos' and 'donts' of the Igbo society. These tales were told in Igbo indigenous language. Every tale has its moral lessons derived from it and the Igbo child learns a lot from the tales. E. Idolar says that folktale performance is an instrument which helps learners to acquire needed social details that help them to face real life situations. According to him

> …folktale and all the paraphernalia of its performance are indigenous to African houses… "Folktales are intentionally related to real life situations to ensure that virtue prevails at the end of the narration. Learners from their participation in the performance, develop confidence accept role play and aspire to become orators. (5)

Moreover, the educational development of an Igbo child stems up from what is spoken in the homes in his mother tongue. Stories, lullabies, songs, folktales

sang by parents and siblings, riddles, tongue twisters and other forms of informal education received by the child prevents him from social anomally. Most of these are what he acquired before exposure to formal education. These methods of bringing up a child are very fundamental for his all-round development.

In recognition of the above, Nwachukwu Agbada in reflection of his childhood home training says:

> As toddlers even before we went out to embrace formal education, we were already enriched in life by our exposure to our various mother tongues, and we became very curious about the world by the poetry and stories in the local lore. Again, knowledge acquisition or even application is only possible in one whose sense of curiosity has already been aroused. (5)

The above statement shows that the Igbo language instructs and educates the indigenes at home before going to school.

Also, the Federal Government in the National Policy on Education realizes that indigenous language is a good tool for nation building when it made provisions that:

That the medium of instruction will be mostly the mother tongue. “Thus every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment in the pre-primary and primary schools for the first three years”. Also in secondary schools “the language of the environment shall be taught as L_1 where it has orthography and literature”. (National Policy on Education 2004: pp10, 16 and 19).

Matters affecting Igbo people are discussed through the use of Igbo language. This language is a unifying cultural agent that makes it easy for them to gather together and discuss their well being. By this type of communication, the

group believe themselves as one body. As such, they share a lot in common. So, language brings unity, peace and love among the speakers and even encourage them to work as a team. This is evident in the Igbo proverbial saying "Ibu anyị danda". This portrays the team spirit of togetherness that encourages individuals to work very hard in other to help others and contribute to the welfare and development of the family, village, town and society at large irrespective of any adverse condition.

The Igbo language is a communion language. Ndịigbo strongly believe they were created by God. For this reason, they dwell so much in the worship of God. The traditional religious worship brings interaction between the Igbo and the Supreme Being, minor gods and ancestors. The Igbo man is noted to be deeply religious in nature and this manifests in his prayers. These prayers are characterized by sacrifices to atone and appreciate the gods. The prayers whether invocative, petition or request, are said for a purpose "the desire of man to succeed and be protected". Therefore, the language (Igbo) is the mode of communication between them and their gods. Onwuliri in support of this idea opines:

> Traditional prayers equally play an important role in the promotion of the sense of community… The elder in most traditional societies begins the day by offering prayer and supplications for himself, members of the kindred and entire community. (142)

Such prayers follow this pattern:

> Onye okike, Eke kere xwa b[a taa qj[. Ogwugwu b[a taa qj[. Xmx g[ab[ala [nata ike n'aka g[. Ihe I kwuru bx ihe ga-eme. Ya mere bupuru any[qnwx, mfu, mmegbu na arxrxala. Chekwaa any[, xmx any[, anx any[na akxnaxba any[. Ekwela xkwx pxq any[ama xbqch[njq. Q b[ara nga any[s[

> ya b[agbuo any[ya lawa mkpumkpu tokwee ya n'azx.

With the confidence, the people will go about their businesses because their gods understand their language and will protect them. In support of the above view, Obiefuna and Aniago quoted Madu that "African traditional religion was founded as a result of the search for African ancestors for rational explanation to the mysteries of existence".(340) Hence they formulated myths, legends, folklores, proverbs and wise sayings. They also identified a Supreme Being who holds the whole world in existence. African traditional religion, including Igbo indigenous religion does not have a founder like the missionary religions and does not have sacred literatures (scriptures). The above will confirm that it was the spoken language (Igbo) that brought interaction between them and God. The Igbo language is their tool for communication.

Igbo language is a custodian of Igbo culture. The culture of Igbo people are expressed in their language. This is why its threat of extinction amounts to total disaster. In the words of Ohiri-Aniche

> One of the consequences of Igbo language endangerment is that the Igbo lose the wealth of their intangible cultural heritage. As an orate culture, the wealth of Igbo knowledge in all its ramifications is encapsulated and preserved in the language and has been transmitted orally to future generations. Allowing the language to decay and die will amount to wiping out 6000 years of accumulated cultural wealth. (20)

Igbo language serves as a compendium of accumulated wisdom, knowledge of the Igbo in terms of songs, history of people, festivals, proverbs, anecdotes etc. Therefore, this language should not be allowed to go into extinction.

The Present Condition of the Igbo Language

It is disheartening and very disappointing that the Igbo language which is supposed to be spoken with vigour and pride among the Igbo, is just among the endangered languages. The reason being negligence by its speakers to use it for effective communications and transaction of businesses. Igbo indigenes regard foreign things superior and hold everything local to contempt. Most of our schools neglect the first language and culture while so much importance is attached to the foreign language and culture. Policies are made and implemented in foreign languages. Some parents nowadays speak English to their children so much that most of them have no opportunity of learning their mother tongue as their language. When they grow, they have the difficulty of learning the mother tongue and the culture which they left at younger age. These problems arise because the child's ideas and thoughts are in his own language and if the child is to be encouraged to think for himself, he must first be helped to think in his own language.

The more globalised and computerized the Igbo indigenes become, the more our indigenous language, Igbo is lost. There was a time when a student or candidate wants to register for Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE) and fails to register among the subjects one of the Nigerian languages, the registration will not be accepted. It would be deemed that his subjects are not complete. But presently, these Nigerian languages – Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba are no more compulsory in our secondary schools and in SSCE. They are now optional subjects. This is the last straw that broke the camel's back. Since Igbo language is now optional in secondary school, if care is not taken, it will not be taught in primary and pre-primary schools at all. Then how would the language grow and

contribute to nation building? The students who hate Igbo as a subject now rejoice and leave the class whenever the Igbo teacher comes in; but the English language is compulsory. Robbing Peter to pay Paul! The situation has caused more harm than good as one no longer identifies, understands, relates, has or shares things in common with a fellow Igbo man because they no longer speak the same language. When one language is not used by indigenes, how can the language be used in policy making, policy implementation and nation building?

Many schools in Igbo land forbid speaking the Igbo language in the schools, for those that teach the language, it is only spoken during Igbo period. Any child found speaking Igbo after that is fined #10.00 or #20.00. Even in the church, the Igbo language is neglected. Everywhere is filled with the new generation churches. Their preaching is always in the English language because "the only language God understands is English". Every congregation is a foreigner in his father land. In the Roman catholic churches, the Rev. Father tunes up a song in Igbo, the choir will sing in English or Latin. This is not to the good of Igbo language for it will help to make it not forge ahead like its counterparts – Hausa and Yoruba.

The avoidance of speaking Igbo language has affected us economically. The locally produced goods are no longer cherished by Igbo indigenes. They prefer the foreign ones. Nobody patronizes the locally made goods. Before the independence and civil war, Igbo indigenes had grips at local works like palm wine tapping, bicycle repairs, black smithing, shoe making, cloth weaving and what have you. By then many young men had a lot of works to do. There was nothing like unemployment. But today, the reverse is the case. They have relinguished their interest in those things mentioned above for easier "get rich quick syndrome". Many have taken to armed robbery, drug trafficking, kidnapping and other criminal activities. In view of the above, Chukwuezi laments,

> Before the civil war, we were proud of being Igbo, we prided ourselves with Aba made products: we were very enterprising and wanted to compete with the world. A lot of unparalleled technological innovations during the civil war, we walked … suddenly, we felt ashamed of ourselves and our language and culture. We preferred anything foreign to Igbo land; foreign music to our own, foreign language and cultures to our own, foreign products to our own. In fact, some Igbo will prefer to speak Hausa or Yoruba to Igbo in their homes as a sign that they have been to … (5)

In the academic circles, people frown at students who say they are studying the Igbo language as a course in the tertiary institutions. Such a course, to them, is only good for dullards and the less intelligent and less privileged who have nothing better to do with their lives.

Findings:

i. It was observed that Igbo indigenes shy away from speaking their language even in the gatherings of Igbos alone.
ii. If the indigenous languages more especially Igbo is neglected by the indigenes, it will become extinct. They will be forced to make their policies and implement them in a language that is not Igbo leaving the Igbo language disadvantaged as it cannot contribute its quota in nation building.
iii. It was also observed that no Igbo indigene speaks Igbo fluently without either code-mixing or code-switching.
iv. Some parents do not want the Igbo language spoken in their homes.
v. Most of the pre-primary and primary schools in Igbo land fine their pupils for speaking Igbo in the class, just to mention but a few.

Recommendations and Suggestions

The researcher has the underlisted recommendations based on the above findings.

i. That Ohaneze ndị Igbo should have an Igbo forum at least once in a month where the importance of speaking the Igbo language should be emphasized. Also meetings of any sorts or gatherings made up of only Igbo indigenes should be made to understand that whoever losses his language has lost himself and his identity.

ii. Seminars or workshops that may involve parents should be organized in every local government of the Igbo speaking states to enlighten them on the importance of indigenous language in the homes and outside the homes. They should be told how better a child that starts very well from his first language does in the second language.

iii. Igbo indigenes should see "Engligbo" – code-switching and code-mixing as one of the greatest enemies of the Igbo language and should fight against it.

iv. Members of House of Assembly or House of Representatives in Igbo speaking states should use the Igbo language in their discussions and even dress in Igbo attires at least once in a week.

v. Every government, non-governmental organizations and in short everybody in Igboland should bring out time and money to see that the Igbo language does not go into extinction.

Finally, it is suggested by the researcher;

i. that teaching of the Igbo language should be compulsory in pre-primary, primary and secondary schools in Igboland.

ii. that Igbo language should be a compulsory subject which any Igbo indigene should sit for in the SSCE and NECO examinations.

iii. that the Igbo language should be an entry requirement for gaining admission into any tertiary institution in Igbo speaking states.

iv. Incentives and awards of scholarships to pupils and students that perform very well in the Igbo language, in both primary and secondary schools, should be encouraged.

Conclusion

There is a need to create more awareness to enhance Igbo indigenes' embrace, love and speaking of their language anywhere. "Otu Sụwakwa Igbo" is doing her best which should be emulated by the entire Igbo indigenes. If the recommendations and suggestions above could be adhered to, the Igbo language will take its position very well like its counterparts – Hausa and Yoruba.

No language can survive without the younger ones acquiring it well. Therefore, every Igbo indigene should force the younger ones to embrace and speak the language very well for it is through language that the customs and traditions of their people are transmitted. Doing so will make the language useful in the making and implementation of policies and consequently afford the Igbo language the opportunity to contribute fully to nation building.

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