# Rethinking African Languages in Our Educational System: Igbo Example

By

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**Abstract**

The researchers using Igbo as a case study demonstrated how African languages have been relegated to the ground in education and social value. It showed that although African Nations using Nigeria as an example have gotten political independence but linguistically dependent on the language of the colonial masters. The major objective of this study is to promote African languages and culture and for better learning of the African children. The study adopts Leo, Vygotsky Socio – cultural theory of 1978 human learning which sees learning as a social process and origination of human intelligent in society or culture. From the research, it has showed that children learn better in their mother-tongue than in the second language. Again, learners struggle with understanding of the language of Education and the subject of study. The paper concludes that for easier understanding and for us to claim full independent, our indigenous languages should be given its rightful place in education.

**Keywords:** African, Igbo, Languages, Education, Mother-tongue.

## Introduction

African people educate their children using foreign language or languages. The colonial masters left us to take care of ourselves yet with click to their language.

As we neglect our language, we also neglect our culture hence language goes with culture.

Igbo people at home for example, instruct their children in Igbo language but the language of instruction in schools is English language. Igbo in some schools is a subject not taken serious while others do not offer Igbo language at all. With the present situation of things, our language and culture are threatened.

Nigeria is now described as an English country simply because of the impact of our colonial masters. Nigerians especially the Igbo ethnic group in particular have relaxed with the language of the colonial masters and relegated their language and culture to the ground. The worst is that a child who speaks Igbo language in the classroom is punished for speaking lingua franca. Even among the Igbo society, one who speaks only Igbo is described as uneducated.

Language is the life wire of the people. When people's language is destroyed, the people has been destroyed. Igbo as a people is now confused in that they now instruct their children in a language that is foreign. The worse is that most parents do not understand English very well yet, they choose to instruct their children in the same language why they themselves are not expert in.

The worst of all is that our formal education is patterned after the English system by the colonial masters. According to Eze (2000:39), "throughout most of the colonial period, in 1842 to 1959, the accent was on English and an educated Nigerian was one who only African in colour but English in culture. According to Eze, the colonialists did not only attempt to subjugate our culture but if it were possible, would have changed our colour to theirs.

The situation today among the Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria is not different. Even at village meetings among the Igbo people, we still find people who speak in English and sometimes in Pidgin English.

Before the western education can to Igbo land, the word unemployment does not exist. Since the arrival of the western education with the English as the language of education, unemployment has come to stay.

English language is alien to Igbo land and cannot be the best language of education among the Igbo and other African natives. This paper exposes the danger of neglect of indigenous languages especially Igbo language in the education of the young ones. Again, it exposes the importance of using Igbo in teaching an Igbo child.

We will first of all review the related literature of what earlier researchers has done.

**Review of Literature**

Here, we will look into what people have written on topics related to the one we are working on.

Igbo language is the mother-tongue of the Igbo native speakers which is like the people's life wire. As Ikwubuzo (2023:5) agrees with Nwachukwu-Agbada (2003:9), that "for each human being, his/her first language constitutes his/her very humanity". For this, tampering with one's mother tongue is like tampering with one's life.

One of the major damage done to Igbo language and culture is the threat to its extinction.

Ikwubuzo (2023:4) advocated for sustainability of our mother tongue and literary tradition. He states "our mother tongue and literary tradition must not die. The neglect of our Nigerian languages especially Igbo language in our schools is so alarming. It is not only that English is used as a medium of instruction but that some schools do not even have Igbo teachers at all.

Igbo is one of the three major national languages in Nigeria. It is the language of the Igbo people. Igbo people is one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. The language is Igbo and the people is Igbo. The major aim of this paper is to rethink African languages in our educational system. This is also to draw the attention of the Igbo native speakers to the importance of their language in educating their children.

**Review of Related Literature**

Here, we will look into some related literatures on language and mother-tongue in particular. Soji (2018:13) described language as a medium of instruction and means of communication. He further states that language is a means by which human cultures are presented, their peace enhanced, conflict resolved and security improved. Considering the above importance of language, it means denying any language from performing any of the functions mentioned is killing the culture and the identity of the people.

According to Kammelu (2017:3), 'language is indeed an instrument for integration and disintegration. It is the basis for public debate, enlightenment and a means of addressing socio-economic challenges in the media. Language determines educability. No language, no power, no society and no difference from other animals. Soji (2018:13) states that language determines productivity.

According to Olopade (2009:3), "in monolingual setting, the only language spoken is the mother-tongue, while in the multi-lingual setting, the strongest language is the mother tongue which is considered to be the best vehicle used to be the one's thoughts". The import of the above explanations is that indigenous language is the potent instrument for effective teaching and learning.

Experiments have shown that education is best started in a child's mother-tongue (MT). Experiments like the Ife-six year primary project (Afolayan, Fafunwa, 1976 and the Rwers small language project education). William (1976), show that the mother-tongue is best suited for education in the first few years of school. Nigerian government has a fantastic policy to implement the result of the experiments but the implementation is weak.

Eze (2000:4), observed that average Nigerian child starts school between the ages of four to six years. According to him, before the child comes to school, he has been exposed to his mother or the language of his immediate community but when the child starts going to schools he finds himself being instructed in a language completely different from the open the language of his immediate community or his mother-tongue. This has been a great problem to Nigerian children, Igbo children not an exception. The children are faced with double problems. They

struggle with the problem of understanding the language of instruction and the subject of study.

In realization of the above challenge, the Nigerian government in its national policy on education (NPE, 1981) specified that at the pre-primary level of education, the medium of instruction will be principally the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community. At the primary level, the mother-tongue is also expected to be changed to English at a later stage.

In many of our schools today, the reverse is the case. Many instruct the child in English from the first day of his arrival to the school. This attitude of our teachers is like asking the children to give up their culture. According to Ikwubuzo (2023:3), "for each human being, his/her first language constitutes his/her very humanity". According to him, to ask one to negotiate it away is akin to asking one to give up one's life.

**Objectives of the Study**

- to educate African children using African indigenous languages.
- to promote and maintain African language and culture
- for better Education of Africans.
- For better identification.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts Leo Vygotsky Socio-cultural theory of 1978 human learning which describes learning as a social process and the origination of human intelligence in society or culture. He emphasizes on the role of social interaction in the cognitive development of learners.

This theory sees human development as a socially mediated process in which children acquire cultural values, beliefs, dos, don'ts of a given society. The study adapts this theory because using the indigenous African languages in educational system of Africa will go a long way in helping our children know our tradition and culture better and be ready to implement them. It will mean educating African children using African environment.

The issue here is for Africans to use African languages as medium of education in African schools. The child's immediate environment plays a great role in his way of life. The child acquires the language and thinks in the language. Therefore, using or introducing another language as medium of instruction will break the bond between home and school. To an adult learner who in one way or the other has learnt some skills using the language of the immediate environment, introducing the use of an artificial language will not only put him/her off but make him/her quit learning. In a situation like this, the immediate language of Africans should be used in African schools as medium of education in all levels for better understanding. The traditional curriculum as well as the modern curriculum that is of the interest of African learners should be used in teaching the African learners. Learning is effective when the learner understands the language of learning with ease.

The benefits of educating the learners in a language they know and understand cannot be overemphasized. It is so enormous and leads to the development of the nation in terms of culture, economic and education, which in turn leads to economic boom which every continent needs.

**Significance of Educating Africans using African languages**

The benefits of educating African learners in African languages as medium of instruction can be looked at under the following captions:

- Better understanding
- Better Education
- Better communication
- Effective entrepreneurship

❖ **Better understanding**

Using African learners will lead to better understanding of any subject the learners are exposed to. This is because the learners know the rudiments of their indigenous languages and will only concentrate in learning the subject of study and not the means. In this case, English language as a subject will also be thought and learned by the schools using the indigenous African languages as medium of instruction. In the case of learning English language, the learners will only transfer the knowledge

they have in their mother-tongue to English language learning and it will make the learning of English very easy and smooth for the learners.
Apart from making learning easy for the learners, using African indigenous languages as medium of instruction on African schools will help the learners think in their indigenous languages which will give room for creative thoughts and visualize images in their inner minds (Dom-Anyanwu, 2022).

- **For Better Education:**
  Education in the words of Dom-Anyanwu (2023), is critical and significant in the development of any society. It is partly about the primary socialization, partly about the process of imparting knowledge and skills, and essentially about the preservation of knowledge for progress and development. It is also about culture sustenance and reproduction.

  Education is not just about literacy and numeracy. It is about value – formation, value – orientation and communication. It is about creating the basis for self – generating and self – sustaining development, predicated on an appropriately defined social – value orientation (Attahiru, 2009). Whether education is formed, informed or non – formed, it is carried out through a medium which is Language. African language which is Igbo is one of them play a lot of roles in the education of African people. Igbo Language as a good example, if used in teaching and learning in our schools, will lead to better understanding of other subjects as well as leading to better implementation of what we have learned. This can be seen in our film industries, music and other areas of life. Educating a child in the language he/she understands better plays a great role in the total life and development of a nation. This had been confirmed by nations like China, India and even Japan. When an African child is educated using any of the African languages as a medium of institution, the child learns better. In the words of Nelson Mandela according to Dom – Anyanwu (2023), "if you talk to a child in a language he understands, that goes to his head but if you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart". Education as a key to every development, must well done. Else, it will not have it's force value. For Africans to develop like other western nations, our youths must

be well educated, and this will be achieved if African indigenous languages are used as medium of instruction in African educational system. The education of African child must be for the interest of African societies and for the African national development.

- **For better entrepreneurship:**
  Entrepreneurship is the process of setting up a business by an entrepreneur who is ready to bear the risk of the business as well as enjoy the benefits that come out of the business. He is the initiator of the business ideas (Dom – Anyanwu, 2022).
  Entrepreneurship is effective in the economic growth of any nation. It creates new business for starters thereby creating employments. It also adds to the national gross income. It creates social change and introduces new innovations. Having seen the benefits of entrepreneur in the development of the nation, it is therefore important to teach African children entrepreneurship education using the indigenous African languages for better understanding of the skills needed for effective entrepreneurship.

- **For better communication:**
  One of the important roles of African languages is for better communication. Igbo language for example, helps for effective interpersonal interactions. Through interaction with family members, peer groups, aunts, siblings and uncles, children in Igbo culture learn communication competence or how to use the language appropriately and strategically in a given social situations (Dom – Anyanwu , 2023). The exposure the Igbo children have using Igbo language make them learn social routines, terms of politeness and ways to address others especially the elders.

**Contribution to Knowledge:**
The study will bring better Education of African children. It will help in presenting and maintaining African culture. Education will be for the interest of Africans and African societies.. This study will go a long way in exposing the African children to the benefits of teaching and learning using African languages as medium of

instruction. It will create in the learners the image of identifying thereby making them proud Africans. Better learning as a result of the process will lead to better implementations which lead to economic boom and natural development.

This will be possible if the African child is educated In a language he knows and understands.

**Conclusion:**

For better Education system in Africa, Africans should educate their children according to their traditions and culture. The environment of a child plays a very important role in his academics. Therefore, the medium of instruction in African schools should be the indigenous African language. We need to bring learning home. Enough of teaching our children using artificial language we can adopt the use of natural language in educating our children. Countries that are doing that are on top of developments in the world today. Whether one liked it or not, education is the key of every development when it is well handled (Dom-Anyanwu, 2023). Therefore, to rethink Africa, the choice is ours.

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