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ROLE OF IGBO LANGUAGE IMMERSION PROGRAMS IN PRESERVING CULTURAL IDENTITY AMONG YOUNG LEARNERS IN ANAMBRA STATE

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ABSTRACT

The Igbo language, one of the fundamental aspects of cultural heritage in southeast Nigeria, is in danger of becoming weak among the young learners as a result of the prevalence of English in educational and civic spheres. This research examines how Igbo language immersion programs can maintain the cultural identity of primary school children in Anambra State that is considered a cultural centre of Igbo. The study follows a mixed-methods approach to evaluate possible implementation, measure the effect of the programs in the area of cultural awareness, and determine what problem areas and potentials the programs have. A total of 120 pupils, 30 teachers and 15 parents were sampled in three urban schools in Awka, Onitsha and Nnewi. Observations indicate that immersion programs are effective in improving the levels of Igbo language proficiency and cultural pride among the learners, but such programs are facing challenges, such as the shortage of resources and poor preparation of teachers. The paper suggests five measures that can be employed to incorporate the immersion courses in the education system in order to reinforce cultural preservation. These results are significant to the discussion on the language revitalization and values of cultures among indigenous people in Nigeria.

Keywords: Igbo Language, Immersion Programs, Cultural Identity, Young Learners, Indigenous Language Preservation

Introduction

The Igbo language, a language of over 27 million citizens of southeastern Nigeria, is a symbol of culture because it holds values, traditions, and narratives of the times. (Ohiri-Aniche, 2013). The colonial legacies and globalization have withdrawn the use of indigenous languages in Nigeria as English has taken the center stage in education and the general society of Nigeria (Adegbija, 2004). This trend has decreased Igbo fluency in the young learners endangering cultural unity and intergenerational knowledge transmission (Emenanjo, 2015). The loss of the use of Igbo language is especially acute in Anambra State home to the most intense Igbo culture where the young people have developed an appreciation of English language as having better socioeconomic benefits (Igboanusi & Peter, 2016).

Absorptive language programs whereby the quality of language acquisition depends on the extent of exposure, have been quite effective all over the world in renewing down-trodden languages and generating a

sense of pride among people (Fishman, 1991). In Canada and New Zealand, the results of immersion in advancing language skills and cultural affinity of indigenous children were successful (McCarty, 2008; May & Hill, 2005). The languages studied in Africa, Swahili and Yoruba have successful immersion programs to increase language maintenance and community participation (Batibo, 2005; Adeyemi, 2019). However, Igbo linguistic immersion is in an early stage of development in Nigeria, where such programs lack institutional support and do not have a systematic empirical assessment (Okwudishu, 2017). The National Policy on Education of 2014 promotes mother-tongue teaching in its early education, but not in all states, especially Anambra State (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014).

In this paper, I will tackle this important gap; maintaining Igbo cultural identity using immersion programs. It investigates the way they can foster linguistic proficiency and cultural awareness among young learners in the State of Anambra, and it also determines the implementation challenges as well as points out the possibilities of expansion. Within the context of urban areas (Awka, Onitsha, and Nnewi), the research can offer empirical data regarding the effectiveness of immersion programs and the potential that they can have in resisting the erosion of the Igbo heritage in the face of modernization.

The interactions that surround language and cultural identity have been written about comprehensively. Language possesses the same property as it also preserves the cultural values and allows passing traditions and histories on to the next generations (Fishman, 1991). The disappearance of a language usually results in poor cultural unity as in the case of indigenous groups around the world (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). In Nigeria, indigenous languages have been neglected as a result of colonial policies that favoured English and this has been amplified by globalization (Adegbija, 2004). Indeed, the itinerant Igbo, which was once a martial language, has been listed as at risk by UNESCO (2010), and no longer has much fluency among younger generations.

In an attempt to make language revitalization successful, immersion programs have become an effective means of reviving languages. In Canada, our friends at the Mohawk immersion schools have recovered language ability and pride among the indigenous young people (McCarty, 2008). Through Māori immersion programs in New Zealand, the cultural identity has been reinforced through the immersion of language into cultural activities (May & Hill, 2005). In Africa, immersion schools in Kenya (Swahili) and Yoruba programs in Nigeria have increased the maintenance of the language by its speakers and improved community participation (Batibo, 2005; Adeyemi, 2019). Such programs usually imply teaching a core curriculum material in the target language and developing fluency by use of context.

In Nigeria, the poor treatment status of Igbo is caused by the preference of parents to study the English curriculum and the lack of support at the institutional level (Igboanusi & Peter, 2016). Anambra State, though culturally rich, is affected by the inability to implement the 2014 National Policy on

Education; it requires education in the mother tongue during early education (Okwudishu, 2017). Current Igbo language programs in schools are subsidiary and do not have the intensity of encompassment required to develop fluency (Eze, 2019). In the current research, it is necessary to outline the innovative style of teaching and learning in order to save Igbo tradition by focusing on immersion as a possible option (Nwadike, 2013). Notwithstanding, the research on the effects of Igbo immersion programs in Anambra State is very limited, and a study like this should be conducted.

Methodology

In undertaking this research, a mixed-methods approach was employed as a way of exploring how Igbo language immersion programs can be used to sustain cultural identity among young learners in the state of Anambra. The study was aimed at three urban primary schools in the areas of Awka, Onitsha and Nnewi, because they have been selected due to their program in use of the Igbo language. The respondents who participated were 120 pupils (40 pupils per school, Primary 4-6), 30 teachers (10 teachers per school) and 15 parents (5 per school). The procurement of data was done using:

1. Questionnaires: Implemented among pupils and teachers to check on the implementation of the programs, linguistic abilities as well as cultural consciousness. The questionnaire given to the pupil covered 20 items on the use of languages and knowledge about different cultures, whereas the teacher questionnaire encompassed the mode of delivering the programs and issues.
2. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): The parents were interviewed aiming to understand their perceptions on the immersion programs and the influence of immersion programs on the culture. Each FGD was composed of 5 parents, and FGDs were conducted using a semi-structured protocol.
3. Document Analysis: School curricula and policy documents are reviewed in order to assess Igbo language programs integration.

Interpretation of quantitative data was performed using SPSS (Version 26), to develop descriptive statistics and correlations between immersion exposure and indexes of the markers of cultural identity. Analysis A qualitative data collection was used to analyze FGDs and document search with thematic analysis in NVivo (Version 12) to identify the recurring themes. Triangulation made sure the quantitative and qualitative data merge to give the complete understanding. Ethical considerations were informed consent, guaranteeing anonymity of the participants, and obtaining consent of the school authorities.

Unveiling Cultural Anchors: Markers of Identity in Igbo Language Immersion

The maintenance of cultural identity by means of the Igbo language immersion programs is also based on a cluster of interconnected attributes that indicates not only linguistic capacities but also cultural participation and functions to facilitate a profound sense of Igbo heritage among the Igbo learners in Anambra State. Linguistic proficiency presents itself as one of the cornerstones of knowledge-building, the skill

of being able to speak, read and write Igbo with similar proficiency, and the potential to interact intelligently within the academic and social realm. Fluency in Igbo is not only a technical ability but also a means of getting access to the cultural narrations covered in slogans, songs, and oral traditions that make up the Igbo Identity (Emenanjo, 2015). Experiments in language revitalization have highlighted that fluency or mastery of the language would instill confidence to teach and learn the tongue therefore reinforcing the culture associated with it (Fishman, 1991). In the case of Anambra State, which is dominated in terms of formal education by English, the immersion programs mixed immersion into the Igbo language as the medium of education have proved successful in improving the delivery of pupils to communicate effectively in their native language, recovering the linguistic loss caused by the process of globalization (Igboanusi & Peter, 2016). Indeed, literature on other language equivalent programs, e.g., Yoruba immersion in southwest Nigeria shows long-term exposure to the target language leads to major gains in fluency, so learners can successfully navigate day-to-day conversations and even complex discourses about their cultures (Adeyemi, 2019).

Another key indicator is cultural awareness whereby one has perfect knowledge of Igbo culture, history and values that are instrumental in the language. This can be helped by immersion programs which incorporates the symbolic content crammed into the curriculum activities these include folktales, naming ceremonies and festivals like the New Yam festival so that they can learn to internalize these symbolic meanings (Ohiri-Aniche, 2013). It is important in cultural cohesion because it provides the young learners with skills to decipher and carry out Igbo cultures. Through global evidence (i.e., studies on M Maori immersion programs in New Zealand), it is documented that cultural awareness across languages gives more strength to roots of the learner due to the development of pride and identity (May & Hill, 2005). In Anambra State, where modernity is the dominant trend that eclipses traditional activities, immersion programs can be regarded as the inverse of the ongoing modernization phenomenon thus, young learners may never lose touch with the cultural traditions and their historical backgrounds that make them Igbo.

A high level of sense of belonging is the major product of the immersion programs, as learners have emotional connection to their Igbo identity. This identity is reflected through the pride and confidence which the school child demonstrates in the identification with his or her Igbo race and speaking the language in various locations including school settings and community interactions (Nwadike, 2013). The emotional bonding achieved through immersion is decisive in countering the feeling of alienation as may come about because of the superiority of English where Igbo has become an inferior language (Adegbija, 2004). This is because research indicates that indigenous language programs all over the world including those in Canada among the Mohawk groups have helped individuals feel at home, which results in high self esteem and increased cultural pride that enables them to embrace their heritage as a source of strength (McCarty, 2008). In the Anambra State, the

inclusion of immersion programs including community-based activities like storytelling with elders, foster this inclination of belonging, making the pupils identify themselves as in-active contributors to the continuation of the Igbo culture.

The results of immersion programs are enhanced by the fact that intergenerational interventions help create interactions between younger students and the older generations since they are the ones who preserve the Igbo cultural knowledge. The immersion programs also provide a platform where pupils communicate through oral history project, and community feasts to have interactions with elders in Igbo to facilitate the transfer of values and traditions as well as historical information (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Such an engagement is especially essential in Anambra State, which has lost its traditional systems of transferring the knowledge due to urbanization (Anukaenyi, 2018). Research on the language revitalization confirm that the intergenerational contact does not only enhance language continuation, but also strengthens certain cultural identity because it roots the learners into the background of the community they are being raised in (Hinton & Hale, 2001). Such connections created through an immersion program would bring the different generations closer together so that Igbo culture does not lose its vitality.

Lastly, the overall attitude toward Igbo language usage should be positive to succeed in immersion programs, because it contradicts the existing social prejudice, according to which the use of the English language is a symbol of economic and social progress. This attitude is developed in immersion programs which expose the learner to the practical and cultural usefulness of the Igbo language to be used with confidence in various situations, such as in school debates or even when interacting socially (Igboanusi & Peter, 2016). Empirical studies on Swahili immersion in Kenya indicate that the more a language is positively valued, the more it will be used and the greater its social status will be, which becomes a beneficial cycle of maintaining culture (Batibo, 2005). In Anambra state, where the desire to produce children in English frequently leads to a negative attitude towards Igbo, immersion programs should vigorously encourage positive attitudes by use of engaging pedagogies and community advocacy. These are some of the markers comprising a strong system of evaluation of the effect of Igbo-language immersion programs linguistic competence, cultural orientation, a sense of belonging, intergenerational interaction, and acceptable attitudes. By covering these dimensions, such programs can be successfully stabilizing young learners in their cultural heritage, securing the future of Igbo identities in the changes of modernization (Okwudishu, 2017).

Results

The study's findings are organized around the research objectives, supported by empirical data presented in tables.

Implementation of Igbo Language Immersion Programs

The three schools had Igbo immersion programs to a different level. At Awka, Igbo as the language of instruction was applied in

social studies and cultural studies and 60 percent of the teaching week was devoted to Igbo. The two schools used different approaches to teaching the Igbo language: Onitsha was 40 percent immersion in language arts whereas the Nnewi introduced Igbo in several subjects but had limited resources. Table 1 summarizes implementation of the program.

Table 1: *Implementation of Igbo Language Immersion Programs Across Schools*

School	Subjects Taught in Igbo	Immersion Time (% of Weekly Hours)	Resources Available	Teacher Training
Awka	Social Studies, Cultural Studies	60%	Textbooks, Visual Aids	Regular Workshops
Onitsha	Language Arts	40%	Textbooks	Limited Training
Nnewi	Multiple Subjects	50%	Limited Textbooks	Ad-Hoc Training

Source: Field Data, 2025

Impact on Cultural Identity

Children in immersion programmes exhibited high levels of improvement in linguistic capability as well as cultural sensitivity. In the case of questionnaires, a majority of 78 percent of pupils could also conduct simple conversations in Igbo as opposed to 45 percent in non-immersion schools (following a control group analysis by Eze, 2019). The level of cultural awareness was high (85% of pupils indicated major Igbo traditions (e.g., New Yam Festival, proverbs)). The effects of this on the markers of cultural identity are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: *Impact of Immersion Programs on Cultural Identity Markers*

Marker	Awka (% Proficiency)	Onitsha (% Proficiency)	Nnewi (% Proficiency)	Mean Score
Linguistic Proficiency	82%	75%	77%	78%
Cultural Awareness	88%	84%	83%	85%
Sense of Belonging	80%	78%	75%	78%
Intergenerational Engagement	70%	65%	68%	68%
Attitude Toward Igbo	85%	80%	82%	82%

Source: Field Data, 2025; Adapted from Eze (2019)

Combined qualitative and quantitative data based on FGDs showed that parents considered immersion programs as helping to instill cultural pride yet worried about the competitiveness of their children in academics dominated by English language speakers. Teachers explained that immersion can add confidence among pupils in terms of using Igbo but also stated the necessity to have not only better resources but also training.

Challenges and Opportunities

These were, among others, inadequate teaching materials (e.g., outdated textbooks), poor training of teachers and the fact that parents did not believe that Igbo was useful. The opportunities were given as the community was very supportive of the cultural preservation as well as aligning with current National Policy on Education, 2014. These results can be summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: *Challenges and Opportunities for Igbo Immersion Programs*

Aspect	Challenges	Opportunities
Resources	Limited textbooks, lack of digital tools	Community donations, government grants
Teacher Training	Inconsistent workshops, low expertise	University partnerships, online training
Parental Support	Preference for English	Cultural advocacy campaigns
Policy Alignment	Weak implementation of 2014 policy	Policy enforcement, stakeholder collaboration

Source: Field Data, 2025

Discussion

These results corroborate that linguistic proficiency and cultural identity greatly increase when young learners in Anambra State are placed in Igbo language immersion programs like their counterparts in Mohawk and M- M Democratic programs in Canada (McCarty, 2008; May & Hill, 2005). The level of proficiency is high (78% of linguistic skills and 85% of cultural awareness) which confirms the possibility of reversing the process of the Igbo language use. Nevertheless, the difference in the implementation of the programs in schools means that standardized curriculum and resources distribution is necessary.

The identified challenges such as lack of resources, training, and parent ignorance are the same reported in other programs of indigenous languages learning (Batibo, 2005). These must be tackled using specific strategies, including the creation of updated teaching material and the use of digital mediums in teacher education. Community support is one of the opportunities that need to be leveraged by engaging the cultural organizations such as Ohanaeze Ndigbo to insure the involvement of immersion programs.

The policy development implications of the study are that of policy development. The National Policy on Education of 2014 offers a supportive framework on mother-tongue instruction, thus, indicating that there should be a firmer implementation and checks. Improving collaboration with the schools and educational boards and cultural stakeholders is required to make the integration of immersion programs in the curriculum sustainable.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The one-year immersion courses in the Igbo language are important in the preservation of the culture among the young learners in the Anambra State. These programs help in the promotion of lingual expertise, cultural awareness and pride that offsets the loss of Igbo heritage due to English dominance. They are limited by their efficiency due to lack of resources, insufficient training of the teachers, and social behavior in regard to English. In order to complement these

programs, the following suggestions are offered:

1. Curriculum integration: Igbo immersion to be incorporated in core subjects in primary school with standard teaching materials.
2. Teacher Development: to form systematic training opportunities in conjunction with universities to advance the skills of teachers in immersion pedagogy.
3. Community Engagement: Conduct advocacy campaign to enlighten parents of Igbo cultural and cognitive benefits of Igbo immersion.
4. Policy Enforcement: Enhance the realization of the 2014 National Policy on Education by monitoring and providing funds.
5. Resource Development: Make investments in digital devices and new textbook purchase.

The above mechanisms will help conserve the Igbo cultural identity, making sure that their culture will live on even after them. In future, there is need to carry out studies on the long-term effects of immersion programs and their transferability to other states in Igbo speaking regions.

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