

## English Language and Language Endangerment in Ikwerre Ethnic Nationality

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### ABSTRACT

*This study investigates the extent to which English Language, used as language of the environment in most Ikwerre communities, has endangered the Ikwerre Language spoken in Rivers State, Nigeria. The study is based on mentalist and social interaction theories. Four research questions are developed to guide the study. A sample of 480 native inhabitants from two local government areas (Obio/Akpor and Ikwerre) in Ikwerre Ethnic Nationality is selected, using stratified random sampling technique. Three hundred (300) native speakers are drawn from five communities in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area while one hundred and eighty (180) are drawn from three communities in Ikwerre Local Government Area. The instruments for data collection are the questionnaire and oral interview. The data collected are analysed, using simple percentages. The study finds that English Language dominance in most Ikwerre communities hinders the spread of the Ikwerre Language. It is also found that many Ikwerre children cannot speak their mother tongue. Hence, the Ikwerre Language is at the eroding stage of endangerment. The researcher points out that the endangerment is reversible since it is still at the early stage. It is, therefore, recommended that Ikwerre Language be strengthened through status and corpus planning, and that children be motivated to speak the language, by giving incentives to children who speak it fluently. This work has contributed to knowledge, as the linguistic damage to Ikwerre Language due to environment has been discovered.*

*Keywords: English Language, Language Endangerment, Ikwerre Ethnic Nationality.*

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### Introduction

English Language has gained so much prominence in Nigeria that its dominance has stifled the growth of many indigenous languages. The dominance of English Language

in Nigeria is as a result of its indispensability, for its use cuts across different spheres of the nation. Other contributory factors include the glorification of English Language by the elites and the defective National Policy on Language. These factors have undermined the indigenous Nigerian languages. Chepkemioi (2019) estimates the indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria to 520. Because these indigenous languages are not mutually intelligible, English Language (the language of colonialism) serves as a foreign/second language in Nigeria. The use of English Language has become so widely accepted in Nigeria that the various indigenous languages are robbed of their importance in national development. English is the language of politics, trade, mass communication and education. It is the language used for instruction from kindergarten to university levels in most states of Nigeria. English is so important in Nigeria that one must have the appreciable knowledge of English Language to be relevant in the society (Ademowo, 2016). Most schools prohibit the speaking of indigenous languages at school, and most parents want their children to have English as their first language. Omego (2014) observes that children are no longer competent in their indigenous languages. One of the indigenous languages that are affected is the Ikwerre Language.

At the advent of colonialism, the Ikwerre people were exposed to English Language. Due to the better standard of living and a higher social status English Language offered, most of the people switched to English which they considered a superior language (Abia, 2015, cited in Mmelisi, 2019). Moreover, the population of most Ikwerre communities is made up of people from other ethnic groups across the nation; hence the use of English as the language of the environment, to the detriment of Ikwerre Language (Omego, 2014). The Ikwerre Language is now being used in a reduced number of domains. Parents discourage their children from speaking Ikwerre at home, and teachers lack interest in teaching it at school. Pupils themselves prefer reading materials written in English to those written in Ikwerre Language, and publishers are no longer willing to publish books written in Ikwerre Language. Agumagu and Badey (2007) point out that the implementation of Ikwerre Language curriculum has been bedeviled by these setbacks.

The implication of having English as the language of the environment in Ikwerre communities is that many Ikwerre children (especially those whose parents speak English) do not even have the opportunity to listen to the Ikwerre Language, let alone acquire it. They therefore speak English Language exclusively. This is in line with the belief of many psychologists, that the environment in which one finds oneself contributes to one's acquisition of language. Acquiring a language requires the gradual development of ability in a language, by using it naturally in communication situation (Omego, 2014). Children require sustained interaction with other language users in order to bring their latent language faculty into operation within a given language. In other words, children can acquire a language that is not their mother tongue as a result of the environment in which they find themselves. A language is preserved when people are fond of speaking it at home, school, office, market places, churches, media and other business transactions (Chukwudile, 2012). According to Krass (2007) cited in Omego (2014), if children are to speak a language in 100 years, the language will thrive, the language will be endangered if children do not speak it in 100 years.

### **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The aim of this study is to investigate the extent to which English Language dominance in Ikwerre environment has endangered the Ikwerre Language.

The objectives are, to:

- i. Determine the extent to which Ikwerre Language is spoken at home by Ikwerre natives in Obio/Akpor and Ikwerre Local Government Areas
- ii. Investigate the use of Ikwerre Language in primary and secondary schools in Obio/Akpor and Ikwerre Local Government Areas
- iii. Examine the extent to which the Rivers State owned media is used in promoting Ikwerre Language pedagogy
- iv. Find out the difference in the use of Ikwerre Language between children and adults in Obio/Akpor and Ikwerre Local Government Areas.

### **Research Questions**

- i. To what extent is Ikwerre Language spoken at home by Ikwerre natives in Obio/Akpor and Ikwerre Local Government Areas?
- ii. To what extent is Ikwerre Language used in primary and secondary schools in Obio/Akpor and Ikwerre Local Government Areas?
- iii. To what extent is the Rivers State owned media used in promoting Ikwerre Language pedagogy?
- iv. What is the difference in the use of Ikwerre Language between children and adults in Obio/Akpor and Ikwerre Local Government Areas?

### **Key Concepts**

The following concepts are defined, in relation to the present study;

#### **Language Endangerment**

An endangered language is a language that is at the risk of losing all of its speakers. According to Hale (1992), cited in Hoffmann (2009), a language is in an endangerment situation when it is dominated by a more powerful language. Consequently, the language begins to reduce in domain coverage because of the presence of the dominant and powerful language. Adewale and Oshodi (2013) view language endangerment as a situation whereby a language is under the threat of disuse. Endangered languages are not necessarily languages with few speakers. The viability of a language is determined by the general attitudes of its speakers towards the language. In this respect, the intergenerational transmission of the language is the most important feature of language vitality. According to Crystal (2000), a language is endangered when there are few or no children learning the language, and the youngest good speakers are young adults.

#### **Ikwerre Language**

Ikwerre is a language spoken primarily by the Ikwerre people who inhabit Rivers State, in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Ikwerre is also a linguistic group made up of

four closely related local government areas, which include Emohua, Ikwerre, Obio/Akpor and Port Harcourt City Council. In present day Rivers State, the Ikwerre people, who are over one million, account for about 35% of the population of the state, estimated at 4.388 million people (Mmelisi, 2019). The Ikwerre people have Ikwerre Language as their mother tongue. However, they were exposed to English Language by the coming of the colonial masters.

### **Mother Tongue and First Language**

Mother tongue is considered to be the child's native language. It is the language spoken by a child's ethnic group. Mother tongue is passed down through generations, and the child acquires it at home from his parents. Nwala (2015) notes that a child's mother tongue may not necessarily be his first language; it could be another language. He points out that mother tongue and first language can, however, be the same if the child grows up in his parents' native environment. This means that a child, who grows up in the environment where his parent's native language (mother tongue) is spoken, acquires his mother tongue as his first language.

First language is the language of the child's immediate environment. As children grow up, they pick up words, phrases and eventually, the entire language. This is the first language. It could be the mother tongue or a different language. In a situation where a child picks two languages side by side, (his mother tongue and another language), his mother tongue serves as both mother tongue and first language while the other language becomes his alternate first language. (Nwala, 2015)

### **Language Learning and Language Acquisition**

Language learning involves a second or foreign language. Shaul (2014) defines language learning as the learning of a language, its sounds system and its structure which is usually an intellectual exercise. Kramina (2000), cited in Zasserinska (2010), observes that language learning, as a conscious process, is the product of either formal learning situation or self-study programme. Language learning is a bilingual situation since the learner already has a first language. The learner is motivated by a need which could be the need to widen his scope of interaction and become well informed (Nwala, 2015). In language learning, the learner sets out a goal to learn the language under certain learning principles. Unlike in language acquisition where language is absorbed unconsciously, language learners are taught by teachers and facilitators who have set objectives.

### **Language Acquisition**

Language acquisition is a child's unconscious process of acquiring the language of his or her parent's environment. According to Shaul (2014), a child absorbs a target language's sound system and structure without being conscious of it. When this happens, the child has acquired the language. Omega (2014) sees language acquisition as a process whereby a child naturally masters a language without necessarily learning it in the sense of receiving instruction. Nwala (2015) adds that language acquisition involves a first language or a mother tongue, and usually occurs in an informal setting. He points out that

a child does not need any form of pedagogical process to manifest the language of his parents. According to him, the child's linguistic environment ignites the naturally endowed linguistic network. If a normal child grows up in an environment where people live and communicate with one another, the child will pick up the language spoken by the people. In other words, a child acquires a language through interaction with parents, adults and other children.

### **English Language**

English is the language of the people of England and the U.S., which has become the language of many areas now. It is the language of corporate environment and one of the dominant business languages across the world. In fact, English Language is a global lingua franca. It is estimated that two third of the world's population use English (Crystal, 2000). In Nigeria, English Language is used as both lingua franca and official language of communication. It is also studied at school as a compulsory subject to be taken by students to qualify them for entry into higher institutions. Students are therefore trained to be competent in the language.

### **Language Policy and Planning**

Language policy refers to an overall plan embracing the general goals and acceptable procedures of a governmental. Language planning is a deliberate effort to influence the function, structure or acquisition of languages or language varieties within a speech community. Cooper (1989) defines language planning as the preparation of a normative orthography. Language planning is often associated with government planning, but also used by grass-root organizations as well as individuals. It involves the establishment of committees, societies or academies to design or develop new structures to meet contemporary needs.

### **Empirical Review**

A number of indigenous Nigerian languages have suffered serious deprivation from the negative influences of dominant languages. Any language that is no longer acquired by children is at the risk of endangerment, and subsequently, death. Enwere and Uchamma (2005) observe that many indigenous Nigerian languages are at various levels of endangerment and possible extinction because of lack of acquisition and use. This has become a predominant issue among linguists. Studies on language endangerment, approached from different aspects, have therefore been carried out by different scholars. The findings of these studies are reviewed under the headings below.

### **The Influence of Home Environment on Language**

Sarvi (2016) investigated the state of endangerment of Eggon Language in Nasarawa State of Nigeria. The study covered the degree of its endangerment, factors responsible for its endangerment and whether or not the endangerment is reversible. Three hundred and eighty-one native speakers of Eggon Language formed the sample size of the study. Questionnaire and interview schedule were adopted as research instruments. Copies of the questionnaire were administered on three hundred and eighty-

one respondents and the same number was interviewed, to determine the state of endangerment of the language. After ascertaining the endangerment of Eggon Language, the degree of the endangerment was discovered, and it was found to be severely endangered. The result of the work showed that lack of language use at home, and the negative attitude of the native speakers towards the language were the major factors that initiated and hastened the endangerment of the Eggon Language.

Omego (2014) investigated the influence of environment on the acquisition of English by the Nigerian child. Forty-six teachers and twenty-six parents formed the sample size of the study. Out of a total population of 72 respondents, 51 were sampled using the purposive sampling method and survey research method. Questionnaire and interview schedules were adopted as research instruments. Copies of the questionnaire were administered on selected teachers and parents to determine the influence of the social environment on the child's acquisition of English, and to determine the effect of English Language on the maintenance of the child's mother tongue. The method adopted in analyzing the data was simple percentage. The analysis of data collected showed that the children use English at play because of the multilingual setting in which they find themselves. The result showed that the acquisition of language by the Nigerian child is influenced by home environment.

Abah (2017) investigated language endangerment and revitalization of Orokam dialect spoken by the Orokam people of Idoma Kingdom, Benue State. The purpose of the study was to find ways in which the dialect could be saved from extinction. Questionnaires and oral interviews were used for collection of data. The findings revealed that the Orokam people did not use their dialect at home. There was no written literature on the dialect and the dialect was not used as a medium of instruction from the nursery to junior secondary school, as recommended by the national policy on education. In addition, the people of Orokam failed to use their dialect in social environment and the media. The findings of this study show that the Orokam dialect was endangered because the indigenous people failed to use it in several domains, including the home.

### **The Influence of School Environment on Language**

Olagbaju, (2014) examined the current practice of multilingual education in Nigerian pre-primary and lower primary schools and the challenges encountered by teachers in the implementation of the National Policy on Education. Questionnaires were administered to answer research questions on the following variables – students' attitude, parental factors and lack of materials. The research instrument was validated with reliability co-efficient of 0.68. Data were analysed using simple percentage descriptive statistics. The results of the study revealed that the implementation of the multilingualism provisions of the National Policy on Education (NPE) was poor, especially in the private schools. This is, therefore, one of the reasons children lack interest in Nigerian indigenous languages.

The study carried out by Okonkwo (2016) focused on languages of education in Nigeria and extent of implementation in the Universal Basic Education (UBE) schools in

Ebonyi State. The study adopted a descriptive survey design. The population of the study constituted all the Universal Basic Education teachers in the 13 local government areas of the State. A sample study of 555 respondents was selected using proportionate stratified random sampling technique which reflected teachers in the urban and the rural schools. The instrument used was questionnaire which was validated and trial tested for reliability. A value of 0.84 was obtained. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions while t- test was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05alpha level of significance. Findings showed that languages in education were implemented to a low extent and that materials that enhance effective implementation of indigenous languages were available to a low extent.

Jibir-Daura (2014) investigated the transformation of Nigeria through indigenous language education. The study aimed at showing the importance of indigenous languages in the development and transformation of a nation, citing examples with developed nations such as Russia, China and Germany, which were able to develop because they did not neglect their indigenous languages. The study suggested that in order for Nigeria to be positively transformed, it has to pay more attention to codifying its languages (developing orthographies, dictionaries and grammar). It also recommended that indigenous speakers of the languages should change their negative attitudes and help the government to develop the languages; the educational language policy should be enforced; the learning and use of these languages should not stop at the primary level but continue up to the tertiary level and that technological and scientific terms should be translated into the various indigenous languages to make teaching and learning easier.

### **The Influence of the Media on Language Use**

Okudo and Ifeagwazi (2014) carried out a study on the utilization of Igbo radio programmes to improve the knowledge and positive attitude of Igbo secondary school students towards their indigenous language and culture. It aimed at producing some packaged Igbo radio software. This was based on selected topics from Lagos State unified scheme of work on Igbo Language which was used to teach in the class and also broadcast on the radio station. Purposively selected sample of four hundred secondary school students of Igbo origin were drawn from ten secondary schools in Lagos State on the basis that they offered Igbo language as one of their school subjects and are also using radio facilities in addition to conventional methods of teaching and learning. The instrument for data collection was a questionnaire on attitude and motivation of students on the use of Igbo radio programmes to improve their knowledge of Igbo language. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics- frequency and percentage. The findings of the study showed that 98 percent of the students developed more interest on Igbo language and culture, while 90 percent of the students improved on their knowledge of Igbo Language and culture through listening to Igbo radio programmes.

Nwamuo and Salawu (2019) carried out a study on radio programmes through indigenous languages: 'A Study of Igbo Scholars' Assessment of the Effectiveness of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in promoting African languages'. Interviews

were used to collect data from scholars of Igbo language in a federal university situated in the south-eastern part of Nigeria, which is an Igbo-speaking region. The explanation-building technique was applied in analyzing the data. The study concludes that although the technique is not yet effective because contents are only shared online, it is a step in the right direction. It is, therefore, recommended that BBC Igbo Service contents need to be incorporated into radio and television platforms in order to attract appreciation, participation and engagement from the native speakers of the language.

### **The Difference in Language Use between Children and Adults**

Ohiri-Anche (2008) carried out a study on the awareness of language endangerment, and other issues of language use and preferences from eight hundred adults spread over four States of the Federation-Akwa - Ibom, Imo, Lagos and Sokoto States. Descriptive survey methodology was used for the study. Findings included the following: 71% of respondents have not heard of language endangerment; 83% do not believe their own language could die, while 89% would regret if their language became extinct. This regret, however, seems misplaced since only 40% spoke to their children in their indigenous language. The study also found that adults could speak their indigenous language, but many children could not. According to the study, 15% of children aged 6 years to 11 years could not speak their parents' indigenous language while the figure rises to 25% among children aged 5 years and below.

Blench (2002) conducted a survey of some of the endangered languages of Central Nigeria. Among the languages he surveyed was Iten, spoken by Ganawuri people who live around Ganawuri Town, southwest of the Jos, Plateau State. The exact size of their population is unknown but it is estimated at 40,000 people, according to him. The findings showed the Iten Language was not endangered because most of the population could speak it. The study also revealed that adults were more fluent.

Emeka-Nwobia, (2020) explored the viability of the Igbo Language in Nigeria and its tendency towards endangerment. Data were drawn from randomly selected schools, churches, and homes in two Igbo speaking states in Nigeria – Ebonyi and Enugu. The instruments for data collection were oral interviews and participant observations, from September to November 2014 and February to July 2016. Respondents aged 18+ (adult) and below 18 years (children) constituted the representative sample. Sixty-eight adults comprising 30 males and 38 females who were first language speakers of Igbo were interviewed and observed. Eighty-eight children were also interviewed and observed. The children served as the control to check the validity and reliability of the information provided by their parents, and to determine if effective communication and intergenerational transfer occurred from parents to children. Findings reveal that Igbo language is no longer effectively transmitted to children, especially in urban areas. This is due to the negative attitude that some parents have towards the Igbo language and the preference of the younger generation to foreign culture, identity, names, and language. By implication, the number of adults who could speak the language is more than the number of children.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The two theories that are adopted for this study are Mentalist and Social Interaction theories.

#### **Mentalist Theory**

Mentalist theory is also known as nativist theory. It holds that the acquisition of language is a natural phenomenon, and that every normal child is endowed with a set of linguistic mechanism which later develops in form of language, by its contact with the environment. Chomsky (1965), cited in Lund (2003:57), states that all human languages share certain features which are called 'linguistic universals'. (They all have nouns and verbs). According to him, humans are genetically encoded with this universal grammar which is a basic understanding of how communication is structured. Chomsky further explains that humans' innate mechanism called the language acquisition device (LAD) allows children to identify the grammar of the language to which they are exposed, by picking out the linguistic universals.

#### **Social Interaction Theory**

The social interaction theory of language holds that the driving force behind language acquisition is the need to communicate and interact with others. According to this theory, language emerges from, and is dependent upon, social interaction. This means that the environment in which one grows up would greatly affect how well and how quickly one learns to talk. The social interaction theorists do not believe that mere exposure to language is sufficient to acquire it, but that it is a skill learned by interacting with others

#### **Methodology**

This study adopted the description research design of the survey type. Stratified random sampling technique was used in selecting a sample size of 480 native inhabitants of Ikwerre communities Three hundred (300) native speakers were drawn from five communities in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area. Obio/Akpor Local Government Area has seventeen political wards, from which five wards were randomly selected. From each of the five wards, one community was chosen. For Ikwerre Local Government Area, 180 native speakers were drawn from three communities. Each community was chosen from one of the thirteen wards that make up the Ikwerre Local Government Area. Data collected were analyzed using simple percentages.

#### **Data Analysis**

The data collected are analysed in tables thus:

**Table 1:** The Extent to which Ikwerre Language Is Spoken at Home by Ikwerre Natives in Obio/Akpor and Ikwerre Local Government Areas

S/N	ITEMS	NO OF YES RESPONSES	NO OF NO RESPONSES	% OF YES RESPONSES	% OF NO RESPONSES
1.	Ikwerre is spoken by everybody in my community.	96	384	20%	80%
2.	Parents speak Ikwerre with their children at home.	47	433	9.8%	90.2%
3.	Ikwerre is the language of the market.	92	388	19.2%	80.8%
4.	Most Ikwerre children communicate with peers at home in English Language.	480	0	100%	0%
5.	Ikwerre language is spoken exclusively in churches.	54	426	11.3%	88.7%

A total number of 480 respondents which is 100% of the population answered the questions above. The table shows that Ikwerre Language is not used adequately at home, as most Ikwerre children no longer acquire it at home.

**Table 2:** The Extent to which Ikwerre Language Is Used in Primary and Secondary Schools in Obio/Akpor and Ikwerre Local Government Areas

S/N	ITEMS	NO OF YES RESPONSES	NO OF NO RESPONSES	% OF YES RESPONSES	% OF NO RESPONSES
1.	Children are allowed to speak Ikwerre language at school.	92	388	19.2%	80.8%
2.	Ikwerre language is part of the school curriculum.	95	385	19.8%	80.2%
3.	Ikwerre has a standard orthography.	360	120	75%	25%
4.	Children read books written in Ikwerre language.	51	429	10.6%	89.4%
5.	Teachers speak Ikwerre Language among themselves at school.	193	287	40.2%	59.8%

A total number of 480 respondents which is 100% of the population answered the questions above. From the responses, it is clear that students do not read books written in Ikwerre Language, and are not allowed to speak Ikwerre Language in school. The opportunity to learn the Ikwerre Language at school is, therefore, minimal.

**Table 3:** The Use of Rivers State Owned Media in Promoting the Ikwerre Language

S/N	ITEMS	NO OF YES RESPONSES	NO OF NO RESPONSES	% OF YES RESPONSES	% OF NO RESPONSES
1.	Ikwerre lessons are available on television.	114	366	23.8%	76.2%
2.	Parents encourage children to listen to Ikwerre programmes on radio.	192	288	40%	60%
3.	Children do not watch Ikwerre lessons on television.	293	187	61.04%	38.96%
4.	Ikwerre radio programmes do not promote literacy.	249	231	51.9%	48.1%
5.	Literacy in Ikwerre language is promoted through print media.	145	335	30.2%	69.8%

A total number of 480 respondents which is 100% of the population answered the questions above. The responses show that children do not have the opportunity to learn Ikwerre Language through the media, whereas the use of the media is an important way of promoting language use.

**Table 4:** Difference in the Use of Ikwerre Language between Children and Adults

S/N	ITEMS	NO OF YES RESPONSES	NO OF NO RESPONSES	% OF YES RESPONSES	% OF NO RESPONSES
1.	Children do not speak Ikwerre fluently.	384	96	80%	20%
2.	All Ikwerre adults are proficient in their language.	336	144	70%	30%
3.	Ikwerre children often speak their language to one another.	87	393	18.1%	81.9%
4.	Ikwerre adults are more fluent in Ikwerre Language than children.	430	50	89.6%	10.4%
5.	Ikwerre adults speak Ikwerre Language with children.	100	380	20.8%	79.2%

A total number of 480 respondents which is 100% of the population answered the questions above. From the responses, there is no doubt that the number of adults who speak Ikwerre Language is far greater than the number of children that speak it. It is also certain that adults do not speak the language with children, which means that most children have stopped acquiring the Ikwerre Language as their native language.

### Conclusion

This study shows that children are no longer acquiring the Ikwerre Language because most Ikwerre parents speak English at home. At school, Ikwerre language is neither used for communication nor taught as a subject. The media does not provide sufficient opportunities for learning the language. Consequently, the Ikwerre Language is endangered. However, the endangerment is reversible. If adults start communicating at home in Ikwerre Language, and the government ensures the language is taught at schools and promoted through the media, the language will be safe again. Prompt action is therefore required to save the Ikwerre Language from going into extinction.

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