



*INTERNET AFRREV: An International Online Multi-disciplinary Journal*

Vol. 1(2) June, 2012:61-69

ISSN: 2070-0083

[afrevjo.net/journals/internetafrev/vol1\\_no2\\_art10\\_okodo\\_teachingigbolit\\_june2012.pdf](http://afrevjo.net/journals/internetafrev/vol1_no2_art10_okodo_teachingigbolit_june2012.pdf)

## **The Need for Teaching Igbo Literature as a Full-fledged Subject in Nigerian Secondary Schools**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Igbo literature is a supposed full-fledged subject that has been neglected by subsuming it under the Igbo Language subject at the level of Nigeria secondary schools. This subjugation makes the Igbo Literature have less attention than it supposes. This work finds out that so many things should be done to make the teaching of Igbo Literature a subject in the said schools so that the literature will grow. There is no doubt that the literature of a people contributes immensely to the growth of their language. The level at which Igbo literature would of course enhance the study of the Igbo language cannot be over emphasized. The things that should be done include separating Igbo Literature from Igbo Language so that each would be a subject, provision of relevant educational materials for teaching, increase of qualified teachers in the schools as well as increase in the number of periods of teaching the subject, raising the quality of teaching etc. The data for this paper were collected from libraries and interviews. There is no gainsaying that the utilization of this paper by education policy makers will enable them make Igbo Literature a subject. This report is divided into the abstract, the introduction, the explanation of Igbo Literature and the conclusion.

## INTRODUCTION

The Igbo have their own literature, like other peoples of the world do. In their literature, they mirror their society, that is they state the events and actions that take place around them with the view of expressing themselves stylistically. This literature, which they use in demonstrating the figurative expressions of their own Igbo language enables them the opportunities of using linguistic ornaments. The Igbo people's literature is in two forms – oral and written.

This supposed all-important subject is, among others, taught in Nigerian secondary schools. The teaching of Igbo Literature is partial. It is partial because it is treated as a part of the study of the Igbo Language. Because of the partial attention, the supposed subject is not detailed. Only the little that can be accommodated together with the Igbo Language can be taught. If the literature is made a full-fledged subject, the scheme of work will be detailed enough to accommodate oral and written forms with respect to three genres of literature.

## IGBO LITERATURE

Igbo Literature started to exist when the Igbo people started to say, sing, and recite different sub-genres of oral literature. This is very much earlier than the time their language was reduced to writing. So the oral form of Igbo Literature is one part whereas the written form is another. Both oral and written forms of Igbo Literature have the three genres of literature - prose, poetry and drama.

The prose comprises folktales, historical narratives, social stories of day to day events, prayers, songs, conversations and linguistic ornaments like proverbs, wellerisms, euphemisms, fables, parables, exemplums metaphors, similes, personifications, synecdoches, paradoxes, rhetorical questions, hyperboles, puns etc. The next genre that is poetry is made up of poems. The dramatic aspect of Igbo oral literature consists of different kinds of play and shows like masquerade plays, ritual plays etc. All these sub-genres have been existing and not everybody took note of the fact that they are literature.

When the writing system was invented, writing in various languages started at different periods due to the time respective cultures started to enjoy civilization. Serious studies of Igbo in writing started in Freetown, Sierra Leone, in 1828. That was when the first wordlist was seen in Sierra Leone. From this point, studies in writing in the Igbo language started to spread to Fernando, Po, Europe, before it arrived Ontisha, the Igbo homeland (Nwadike, 2002:27). It was here that various works were written in Igbo for religious worships and training for various church missions. Igbo written literature started with *Omenuko* by Pita Nwanna. He wrote it in 1933. This work is a good novel, of realistic realm. It was followed by D. N. Achara's *Ala Bingo*. The latter which was published in the same year, is a work of fantasy.

These works were not followed immediately by more works as a result of the orthography controversy that dragged the hands of the clock backward. It was even later, that was in 1963, that *Omenuko* was revised into the current orthography which Onwu Committee produced in 1961. However writing Igbo Literature continued. Mbah and Mbah (2007:234) note that some works written before the Nigerian – Biafran Civil War started include the following: *Nkapi Anya Ukwu* (1950) by Chinakwalam, *Elelija na Ihe O*

*Mere* (1952); *Ije Odumodu Jere* (1952) by Leopold Belgam, *Ọsọndu* (1951) by T.K. Oguamana, *Ọkuku Agbasa Okpesi* (1964) by J.U.T. Nzeako etc. After the war, Tony Ubesie took the lead in novel writing and his works include *Ụkwa Ruo Oge Ya* (1973), *Isi Akwu Dara n'Ala* (1979), *Nkoli* (1973) etc. So other Igbo novelists have written more Igbo novels. They include Chinedu Ofomata (a prolific writer), that wrote *Onye na Uche Ya*, *Anụ Gbaa Ajo Ọsọ* etc.

Some writers of Igbo Literature delved into play writing. They and their works include A. B. Chukwuezi – *Udo ka Mma* (1974); S. O. Mezu – *Ụmụ Ejima* (1974); B.I.N. Osuagwu – *Nwa Ngwii Puo Eze* (1977), Odunke Artists – *Ọjaadili* (1977), G. O. Onyekaonwu – *Nwata Rie Awọ* (1974) Godson Echebima – *Ugomma* (1980) etc.

Written poetry is also a part of the Igbo written literature. Various people wrote various poems that were collated into anthologies like *Akpa Uche* (1952) edited by R. M. Ekechukwu, *Utara Nti* (n.d) edited by Nolue Emenanjo, *Aka Weta* (1985) edited by Chinua Achebe and Obiora Udechukwu etc. Some poets published different poems of theirs into collections. They include *Uche bu Afa* (1989) by G. O. Onyekaonwu, *Echiche Miri Emi* (1991) by I. U. Nwadike, *Echiche* by R. U. Ezeuko, *Mbem na Egwu Igbo* (1978) by F. C. Ogbalu, *Nka Okwu* (1979) by J. C. Maduekwe, *Mbem Akwamozu* (1985) by Sam Uzochukwu, *Akọ Bu Ndu* (1988) by A. B. Chukwuezi, *Amadiānaeze* (2003) by Okwudili Njelita and a host of others.

Igbo Literature, both oral and written, has grown enormously. There is a corpus of materials whether traditional or modern that should be properly utilized in teaching Igbo Literature in Nigerian secondary schools. One thing is to write and publish works for educational purposes but another thing is how much they have been judiciously utilized for the advancement of knowledge for which they are meant.

### TEACHING

Teaching, which is the teaching of one thing or the other to a person or persons is formal or informal. It is informal when it is spontaneous, that is when it is not arranged for. This type is taught as occasion arises. It could come up by asking questions. It can also take place when someone makes a mistake, then he is corrected..

Teaching involves the effort of one person or a group of persons to impart knowledge to a person or a group of persons at a particular period of time or from time to time, at an agreed venue. It is this kind of teaching that is referred to when the teaching of Igbo in Nigerian secondary schools come to mind. In this case the teacher has to take his topics from the scheme of work meant for the class of secondary school students he wants to teach. He should study the topics in various books as to get the knowledge required of him or refresh his knowledge of the topics. He has to scale his knowledge to the level of the students. The reason is that the teaching of a topic to Form One students is different from teaching it to Form Six students. The former will be more detailed and advanced than the latter.

The teacher should articulate his knowledge in the lesson note. He has to put it down in writing so that he would not be passive about his preparation. He has to caption his topics and state the steps he would adopt in teaching.

In the course of the teacher's work, he has to use teaching aids in order to make his teaching understandable. He has to present the items he would mention in his lesson. Examples are things like fruits, broom, rope etc. Whereby the things are very big and cannot be procured, he would draw them on cardboard sheets and paste on the chalkboard. At worst, he could draw them on the chalkboard, if he can draw very easily. The importance of teaching with aids cannot be over-emphasized. On teaching aids Adeyemo (1978:144) states:

Visual aids are the materials or objects which help the teachers to make lessons explicit to the children. They also transmit information, ideas and notes to the pupils and disseminate in such a fashion that will modify their aptitudes, habits and practices a complete task.

One area that needs focus is the teaching of new words. Teachers should be mindful of words students have not used before and teach them specially so that when they come across them, they will be able to cope. They should teach their spellings, pronunciations, usages in sentence making etc.

A lot of Igbo people are noted for their inability to speak, read and write Igbo. Many Igbo children both those in Nigeria, outside Igboland, and those overseas cannot speak Igbo, irrespective of their Igbo parentages. This goes to state that their parents do not speak Igbo in the house. Even some adults cannot speak Igbo fluently or speak Igbo without code-mixing it with English. Some Igbo people find it difficult to read and write in the Igbo language. These bring about poor audience for the authors of Igbo publications. Because of some Igbo people's poor knowledge of Igbo in the three skills of language mentioned above, there are good needs for teaching speech, reading and writing in Igbo.

Speech is the form of language that keeps it alive. If a language is less spoken as the Igbo language is today, its existence is endangered. The teacher should train the students to improve their capacities in oral expressions. He can do this by holding sessions of impromptu speeches. All he has to do is to write topics and face them down or roll them up so that the students should pick and speak on. He can also train them in speech with debates. He should group them to propose and oppose chosen topics. The teacher can train the students in oral expressions with test on story telling and tongue twisting; explanations of proverbs, wellerisms euphemisms and other figurative expressions.

The skill of reading in Igbo should as well be considered highly important. The teacher should make the students develop the reading culture for it helps. Fagbemi (1997:61) not only observes that lack of reading culture is not only a result from illiteracy but that there is also a need for "a positive orientation to reading among Nigerians ... for national development because reading equips one with leadership skills and enables the followers to be able to positively challenge their leaders". In teaching reading, the teacher should adopt the Omojuwa (1977:215-16) techniques of pre-reading activities having the idea of the contents, the characters, new words etc; reading and discussing the passages; and post-reading activities evaluation like writing summaries of the passages, using new words in sentence making, analyzing the passages, dividing them into sections etc. The teacher should advise the students to engage themselves in extensive reading which will improve their reading abilities. This will enable the students understand the mechanics of the reading skill. The teacher should take writing in Igbo very serious. This is because,

the inability to write indicates illiteracy. Many Igbo people, even educated ones are not comfortable with reading materials written in Igbo. This author was once told by a professor of Igbo extraction that he should translate a certain lecture from Igbo into English or he would not read it.

### PROBLEMS

As everything that exists in the world, the teaching of Igbo Literature in secondary schools in Nigeria has got its own problems. It is the problems that have been retarding the growth of teaching Igbo Literature. One of the problems is making Igbo Literature a part of a subject at the secondary school level. Igbo Literature is subsumed in the Igbo language. The two supposed subjects are lumped up together unlike in the case of the English Language and English Literature. The letters are separate and have separate periods on the timetable. There is the tendency that the Igbo Language is dominating Igbo Literature. Igbo Literature suffers some negligence because it is not an independent subject.

One other big problem is that Igbo Literature has no scheme. The lumping of the two supposed subjects into one makes the scheme incomprehensive enough to care for the two. There is the need for separate schemes for the two to enable one do justice to both of them. Hardly can one think of oral prose, drama and poetry separately at the early stages of studying Igbo Literature. Even at the university level, the three genres of oral form have not been fully looked into.

Another problem is the allocation of inadequate periods. The Igbo Language has four periods allocated to it, whereas the English Language alone is taught every school day, that is five times a week. It is the four periods of lessons that are shared for the teaching of the Igbo language, literature and culture. The periods are not enough.

One other problem of the teaching of Igbo Literature is the prohibition of speaking Igbo in certain schools. Some school authorities prohibit the speaking of the Igbo language due to some reasons that include the retrogression of the speed of students in learning English due to the interference of their mother tongue, Igbo language. Another reason they usually give for punishing students that speak Igbo in the school with fining them some amounts of money is to curb noise making.

The study of Igbo is highly neglected by many Igbo people. They see the study of the language as something unnecessary and wonder where the graduate of Igbo should belong. It is with this view that the teachers of the language are disregarded. They see teachers of Igbo as those that were so unintelligent that they could not read other subjects they adjudge lucrative. They belittle teachers of Igbo and describe them as teachers of "Igbo Igbo Bk". This means that they belong to the group that teaches cheap subjects like Igbo, Bible Knowledge and similar subjects. One other problem of the teaching of Igbo Literature is lack of trained Igbo teachers. This might sound incredible but it is true. Teachers of Igbo are in great demand. Various government schools lack teachers. Some governments have not been recruiting staff for some reasons best known to them. An example is the Anambra State Government of Nigeria under Governor Peter Obi. It has not been serious with employments of workers. One can imagine how many vacancies that are left unfilled as a result of those that leave their jobs to search for greener pastures, those that retire and those that die in service within a year. Private schools, this researcher

is aware, search for graduates of Igbo and in some cases employ those waiting for their National Youth's Service Scheme. If trained teachers of Igbo are scarce in Igboland, one should then imagine what the situation is in Hausa, Yoruba and other ethnic areas where Igbo is taught as one of the indigenous languages of Nigeria. Lack of those that studied Igbo drastically affects the teaching of Igbo Literature.

One can now see that there are a lot of problems hindering the effective teaching of Igbo Literature as a subject in Nigeria secondary schools. There is hope for solving these problems.

### SOLUTIONS

This problem should be solved by separating the Igbo Language from Igbo Literature so that they will become two separate subjects with due periods allocated to each of them. This will enable each of them receive adequate attention.

The separation of Igbo Literature from the Igbo Language will enable the drawing of a detailed scheme of work for literature. This will make it easy for the two forms of literature, oral and written, to be fully taken care of with respect to the three genres of literature in the forms.

The education policy makers should allot enough periods for teaching Igbo Literature. It should be taught often rather than seldomly. More periods will enable full teaching and evaluation. Students will benefit from full training when there is enough time.

Banning of speaking Igbo in schools should be stopped because the claim of its retardation of the rate of understanding English is untrue. This is untrue because various studies in language have proved that mother tongues do not retard the rate of students' understanding of the second language. The National Policy on Education of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004:12) is vehemently against the prohibition of the indigenous languages of Nigeria in schools for it states that the government shall "ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community" Some authorities in language and linguistics are very much in support of the above policy. Okafor (1990:50) agrees that the use of indigenous languages in teaching "is in consonance with the current thinking of some linguists that an indigenous tongue is the best medium of education". Olaofe (1990:50) approaches language studies "in consonance with the current thinking of some linguists that an indigenous tongue is the best medium of education". And Chumbow (1990) lists a lot of the advantage of using the mother tongue in teaching the child before concluding thus:

The importance of language as the vehicle of knowledge is well known and its role in education is so critical that the issue of the medium of instruction in the schools system should be given all the support it needs to ensure that the genres of the Nigerian child is developed and maximized for it is this and future generations of children that will usher in a brighter tomorrow with respect to the much expected ideal of national development (71-72).

Based on the damage, the prohibition of speaking Igbo is doing to the language and culture of Igbo people as well as the education of the students of Igbo Language and Literature, there is an urgent need to rescind the decisions of prohibiting the speaking of Igbo in various schools irrespective of any reasons.

Some people think that the graduates in one language are paid more than those in other language. This disregard should stop. People should be made to understand that a first degree holder in one discipline is paid the same as the first degree holder in another. Igbo people should be made to regard teachers of Igbo as those that teach their own language, literature and culture which give Igbo people their identity. They should feel sorry for themselves if they learn that if the Igbo language dies, Igbo people would be subsumed by different cultures around Igbo land. So those that will speak Igala will become Igala people, those that will join speakers of Edo will become Edo people, and so on and so on forth with other Igbo people and the language groups that will envelop them.

This problem of lack of trained teachers should give some concern to government officials in charge of education administration and planning in Nigeria. They should give incentives to students of Igbo, increase the quota of admissions of departments offering Igbo studies in all institutions of learning. So that there would be increase in graduates of Igbo language and literature especially with bias for education.

### PROSPECTS

People who belittle the teaching of Igbo Literature are doing so because they feel that it is of no use. But they got it wrong because the students of Igbo Literature will enjoy a lot of prospects on the completion of their programmes.

Another gain from teaching Igbo Literature is the ability to read library materials written in Igbo. If students are well drilled, they will be able to read works written in Igbo and so grow, to a large extent, in their culture. This will curb the problem of well educated Igbo people being unable to read gospels, addresses or speeches in Igbo. If they begin to read materials written in Igbo, they will then patronize writers and publishers of Igbo materials.

Igbo people are notable writers in the English language. No lists of great writers of Literature in English can end up without containing great sons and daughters of Igbo extraction like Chinua Achebe, Chukwuemeka Ike, Cyprian Ekwensi etc. But it is unfortunate that their contemporaries did not write so well in the Igbo language. What one states here is that while these great writers were writing in English no age mates of theirs wrote in the Igbo language as much as they did in English. So with effective teaching of Igbo Literature as a subject, there is a hope of raising wonderful creative writers that will not only be qualitative but also prolific.

The Igbo Language studies, including literature, have not been deeply explored. The culture has been known to relatively lack researches irrespective of virgin grounds yearning for researches. This is clear when studies in Igbo literature is compared with the studies made in other cultures of Nigeria. Afigbo (1981:355-56) describes the situation as:

The fact is that languages like Hausa and Yoruba have now out distanced Igbo as academic disciplines and living media of discussion as can be seen from a survey of the teaching and research programmes of centres of African studies, institutes and departments interested in African linguistics not only in this country but in Europe, America and Russia, Hausa and Yoruba have surpassed Igbo not only in structural growth and in the

evolution of literary dialect, but also in the materialism for ensuring unhindered growth.

There is much hope that effective teaching of Igbo Literature will go a long way in opening vistas of research for the growth of Igbo Literature, both in oral and written forms. It will also bring about the advancement of knowledge in general.

Teaching of Igbo Literature as a separate subject will contribute a lot to the production of graduates of Igbo needed in the labour market. Various graduates of Igbo are needed for filling vacant positions left from time to time in different institutions. The positions for graduates of Igbo are culture officers, research assistants, administrative officers, writers and editors, broadcasters etc. When Igbo Literature and Igbo Language are separated, the lectures in both will attract more students into studying them on tertiary institutions.

All the above expectations are what society stands out to gain from the effective teaching of Igbo Literature as a separate subject from the Igbo Language. There is no gain saying that effective teaching of Igbo Literature should be supported.

### CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that a lot has been done in Igbo studies, especially Igbo Literature. The first step of solving a problem is to identify it. Now that it has been found out that the conditions of Igbo Literature need to be improved, the next line of action is to tackle the problems bedeviling it.

The basic problem of lumping Igbo Language and Igbo Literature as one subject should first of all be solved by separating them so that the schemes of work should be made elaborate enough. This will make students of Igbo Literature know the scope of this subject. It is when the students know what are accommodated in the subject that they should set the goal for studying them all.

The teaching of Igbo Literature should be improved to make it very effective so as to achieve the aim of the study. It is when teachers are enough, know their subjects and impart them very well that one should begin to expect good results.

With effective teaching of Igbo Literature carried out, graduates of Igbo would be able to find their feet in the employments awaiting them. There would no longer be cases where graduates of Igbo are not knowledgeable in the mechanics of the Igbo Language let alone writing correct sentences. They will exhibit good literary knowledge of Igbo in writing various notices, essays, letters novels, poems, plays, inscriptions etc.

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