

EMPOWERING NON-MAJOR NIGERIAN LANGUAGES FOR EDUCATION: THE URHOBOSITUATION

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Abstract

Nigeria is well known as a multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual country with over 525 indigenous languages (*Wikipedia.org*). Besides these, there are exogenous languages such as English, French, Arabic, and the English-based Nigerian Pidgin (NP), which Nigerians need for communication at different times. Three Nigerian languages, namely, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are recognized as major/national languages: they have the largest number of speakers, score highest in terms of level of sociolinguistic vitality, are the most developed for literacy and numeracy and feature strongly at all levels of the educational system in the country. All other Nigerian languages belong to the non-major group: they have fewer speakers, feature, with varying degrees of seriousness, at the 9-year Basic Education level, that is, primary to the junior secondary school level in their respective home states and most are not well equipped to feature effectively as languages of education (Bamgbose2007, Schaefer and Egbokhare 2011, among others). In this paper, we examine the situation with the use of Urhobo, a non-major Nigerian language, in education vis-a-vis the language empowerment strategies discussed by Emenanjo (2010). The study shows that there are gaps that must be filled if Urhobo is to be effectively used in education.

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that language and education, be it incidental, informal, non-formal or formal education, are inseparable as the language of instruction can make or mar the educational process. Stories have it that in the early days of formal education in Nigeria, many children dropped out of school because they could not cope with the ‘strange’ English language used as the medium of

instruction instead of the more familiar mother tongues. Evidence from research has shown that children learn fastest and best when they are taught new concepts in their mother tongue; it makes learning more meaningful, effective, purposeful, and enhances children's creative potentials (UNESCO, 2003). In Nigeria, the Ife Primary Education in Yoruba Research Project 1970-1978 (Fafunwa et al, 1989) testifies to this important relationship between the language of instruction and a child's achievement in education, at least in the initial years of schooling.

Realizing the important role language plays in education, the Nigerian government, in the *National Policy on Education* (henceforth NPE) (1977, revised 1981, 1998, 2004 and 2011), provides that the mother tongue or the language of the environment should function as the principal medium of instruction during the first three years of primary education while English is taught as a school subject; thereafter, from the fourth year to the end of basic education, English takes over as the medium of instruction while the local language is taught as a school subject. Indigenous languages may also be taught as school subjects at the senior secondary school level if they have the necessary resources and approval to operate at that level. In that document, the Federal Government promised to develop many indigenous languages to enable implementation of the policy.

However, apart from the major Nigerian languages, only a handful of the non-major ones have benefitted from government's language development efforts and are used in formal education. In the 2020 West African School Certificate Examinations for the Senior Secondary School (SSCE), the Nigerian languages that featured on the timetable were Edo, Efik, Hausa, Ibibio, Igbo and Yoruba. To feature effectively in education, a language needs to be planned and developed. Emenanjo (2010) discusses four language development/empowerment strategies, namely, status planning, corpus planning, acquisition planning and identity planning. The first three strategies are linguistic activities while the last one is non-linguistic. All four strategies are interrelated and multidimensional in nature and require the collaborative efforts of committed native speakers, government and its agencies, the media (both electronic and print media), and the general public for success to be achieved. In what follows, we discuss each of the strategies as they relate to the use of Urhobo language in education. We also highlight some of the contributions made by the Urhobo Studies Association (henceforth USA) in the language empowerment efforts for Urhobo.

2. Language Empowerment Strategies and the Use of Urhobo Language in Education

2.1 Status Planning

According to Emenanjo (2010), status planning deals with assigning roles to the languages within a polity; the principal actor is the government together with its agencies. Although the native speakers of a language have a responsibility to push for the recognition and use of their language beyond the home, it is the government that assigns functions to the language(s) within her domain, especially in a multilingual setting. In Nigeria, the Federal Government has, in the *NPE*, made policy statements on the use of indigenous languages in education as indicated above. Apart from educational purposes, the Nigerian government has, in the Constitution of the Federal Republic Section 51, also provided for the use of the major languages for legislative purposes on the floor of the National Assembly and the state languages on the floor of the State Houses of Assembly. However, while the Federal Government has over the years empowered the major languages through various projects, commissions and workshops to carry out these functions (see Emenanjo, 1994), most non-major ones have not been so lucky. As a result, state governments dominated by the major languages have to a large extent domesticated the Federal Government indigenous language policies in education, legislation and in the media. In the Southwest geographical zone, for instance, Yoruba is compulsory for all students from primary to the end of secondary education, there are days set aside for the exclusive use of Yoruba for legislative purposes, there are media outlets for the language and the public use it freely in virtually every domain of communication. A similar scenario runs through most of Northern Nigeria with Hausa and the Southeastern zone with Igbo.

Among the non-major languages, Efik enjoyed a good measure of language development and promotion at the federal level even from the colonial era (Essien, 1994). The former Rivers State Government (now Bayelsa and Rivers States) did very well with the *Rivers Readers' Project*. In recent times, 2020, Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly passed a bill for the preservation and promotion of the Ibibio language and for its use at all levels of education, in government institutions and in all public circles.

In Delta State, however, there is no government policy that assigns roles or functions to any of the eleven state languages, not even within homogenous local government areas. Although Urhobo is a major language in the state, it features in education only as a school subject at the Basic Education level and, to some extent, in the electronic and social media but it is not approved to be used formally in governance. A policy on the use of Urhobo like the one proposed for Ibibio would help not only to preserve and promote the language but make it attractive for use and study.

To assess the effectiveness of the use of Urhobo as a language of education in Urhobo speaking areas of Delta State, an unstructured interview involving 40 randomly selected JSS 3 students and the 10 teachers that teach Urhobo in 5 selected secondary schools in Urhoboland was carried out. The following were the major findings:

1. On whether Urhobo is taught in their schools, both students and teachers answered in the affirmative. However, it was reported that it used to be taught twice a week but since the advent of COVID-19, teaching of the language has reduced to a mere once a week because school hours had to be reduced due to COVID restrictions put in place by government. They all agreed that not much was being achieved from the 40-minute contact in a week.
2. On the challenges faced by students learning the language, they identified lack of books based on the approved curriculum and other learning aids (manual and electronic), poor quality of teachers, most of whom have no formal training in Linguistics or Language Education, and poor job prospects for those who might be interested in studying it at higher levels as major setbacks.
3. As for the teachers, they identified as major challenges the lack of enthusiasm in the study of Urhobo by students leading to absenteeism from class (this they attributed to the fact that a failure in Urhobo at the JSS level does not prevent a student from proceeding to the SSS level); most of the teachers lacked the basic skills for teaching the language, many were assigned to teach Urhobo only because they were native speakers; in both the rural and urban areas, the use of Urhobo is rapidly declining with most of the youth population preferring to use NP for communication thereby making Urhobo seem unimportant for study.

From the findings above, it is obvious that Urhobo has challenges concerning its status even in Delta State where it is a major language. It is hoped that influential Urhobo sons and daughters in

government and politics would help to push for the promotion of the language as is being done for Ibibio in Akwa Ibom State. We believe that such a move would also encourage other language owners to try to promote their own languages and arrest the present situation where all the state languages are being stagnated.

2.2 Corpus Planning

The second strategy being examined is corpus planning also called language engineering. It deals with the overall development of a language to make it optimally available for the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills. Emenanjo (2010) breaks corpus planning into three activities, namely, graphization, standardization and modernization. These are briefly explained below.

Graphization deals with the development of a writing system (orthography) which is acceptable to most writers and readers in the language and used by them. Like many Nigerian languages, Urhobo was first committed to writing through the efforts of British missionaries around 1908 but the first formal orthography came into existence in 1931 after the formation of the Urhobo Language Committee, a committee of the Urhobo Progress Union (UPU), the umbrella body for Urhobo affairs. The orthography was reviewed in 1954 also by the Urhobo Language Committee. There is substantial adherence to the Urhobo orthography by writers in the language such that spellings of individual words are generally consistent. However, there are inconsistencies in the representation of a few sounds such as /hw/ written as 'hw' in words like **ohwo** 'person' but which some people prefer to write as **owho** or even **owo**; the sound /ɣw/ spelt as 'ghw' in words like **oghwo** 'soup' but which some writers spell as **owho** or **owo** even though there is a conspicuous sound difference between **ohwo** and **oghwo**; and the sound /v/ written as 'vw' as in **ɛvwɛ** 'goat/kolanut' but which some people write as **ɛvbe** using the old orthography modified in 1954. Another problem with writing in Urhobo lies in the absence of spelling rules to guide word divisions. This makes the writing of utterances that are longer than words quite problematic and inconsistent. The result is that many writers write as they speak and, at best, separate words in sentences by inserting apostrophes between them. Consider the following examples taken from students' scripts in DELSU, Abraka:

1. **mì v'ámè** also written as: **mì vámè** which could be interpreted as either **mì vó àmè** 'I fetched water' OR **mì vé àmè** 'I priced water'
2. **óshàrè nà d'údì** also written as: **óshàrè nà dúdì** which could mean: **óshàrè nàdé ùdì** 'The man bought a drink' OR **óshàrè nà dá ùdì** 'The man drank, had a drink'

Besides, a lot of grammatical information such as tense and aspect is carried by tone but is unmarked in writing resulting in the loss of essential information. Let us consider the structures below (the forms in the brackets are the surface forms):

3. **óshàrè nàá dà ùdì [óshàrè nàá dùdì]** 'the man is drinking/ he usually drinks' (present tense/habitual aspect) (Notice the doubling of the final vowel of the subject noun phrase (SNP).)
4. **óshàrè nàá dà ùdìí [óshàrè nàá dùdìí]** 'the man is not drinking/ he usually does not drink' (present tense/habitual aspect + negative) (Notice the doubling of both the final vowel of SNP and the utterance-final vowel.)
5. **óshàrè nà dá ùdì [óshàrè nà dúdì]** 'the man drank/ had a drink' (past tense)
6. **óshàrè nà dá ùdìí [óshàrè nà dúdìí]** 'the man did not drink' (past tense + negative)
7. **ómótè óyóyònvwì òvòò tòrhè ághwá [ómótóyóyònvwì òvòò tòrhághwá]** 'a/one beautiful girl is burning a bush/farm' (present tense) (Doubling of the final vowel of SNP as in (3) above.)
8. **ómótè óyóyònvwì òvòò tòrhè ághwááá** 'a/one beautiful girl is not burning a bush/farm' (present tense + negative) (Doubling of both the final vowel of SNP and utterance-final vowel.)
9. **ómótè óyóyònvwì òvò tòrhè ághwá [ómótóyóyònvwì òvò tòrhághwá]** 'a/one beautiful girl burnt a bush/farm' (past tense)
10. **ómótè óyóyònvwì òvò tòrhè ághwááá** 'a/one beautiful girl did not burn a bush/farm' (past tense + negative)

In the examples above each set of utterances (3-6 and 7-10) has similar sound segments with only slight differences but they express different concepts. First, sentences (3 and 7) are in the present/habitual tense which is indicated by a floating high tone that links onto the final vowel of SNP and lengthens the vowel. This duplication is not usually reflected in writing thereby making

it impossible to differentiate sentence (3) from sentence (5) which is in the past tense and sentence (7) from sentence (9). Negation in Urhobo is marked by a floating low-high tone sequence which links onto the final vowel of the positive statement and causes vowel lengthening. This is indicated in writing by doubling the utterance-final vowel as sentences (4, 6, 8, and 10) show; it is the only vowel doubling reflected in writing. Second, as in writings in many Nigerian languages, tone is not marked at all in scripts written in Urhobo. There are two basic tones, High and Low plus a phonemic downstepped high tone and they perform both lexical and grammatical functions. Although it has been suggested that only the high tone may be marked, most writers in the language argue that it is unnecessary to mark any tone preferring to rely on context to resolve such issues.

Another concern of corpus planning is standardization which deals with the development of a norm that overrides regional and social dialects and becomes the standard variety of the language used in formal settings and for writing. Like graphization, controversy over a standard written variety prevents the evolution and sustenance of an accepted literary tradition (Emenanjo, 2010). In Nigeria, the development of Yoruba and Igbo languages is worth noting. Apart from promoting the Yoruba language, the Yorubas have successfully promoted the Oyo dialect as the standard variety for writing and for use in education, the mass media, etc. such that although Yoruba has many dialects, some of which qualify to stand as separate languages, there is loyalty to one standard variety of Yoruba. This has not in any way diminished the status of the other varieties which are freely used in the home, intra-group discourse and in sections of books to show dialectal variations. It has helped Yoruba to grow to become one of the three most sought-after African languages internationally, the others being Swahili and Hausa. On the other hand, according to Emenanjo (personal communication), Igbo writing was stalled for many years because of controversies surrounding which dialect to select as an acceptable standard variety as well as disagreement over which of the two orthographies, one developed by the Christian Missionary Society (CMS) and the other by the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM), should be adhered to by all writers. The controversies were later resolved by the Onwu Committee leading to the emergence of the Igbo Izugbe and the development of Standard Igbo (Emejulu², personal communication). This has, in no small measure, helped to fast-track the development of literary

materials in Igbo. In the case of Urhobo, according to Chief S. S. Ugheteni³ (personal communication), the Urhobo Language Committee in 1954 selected the Agbarho dialect as the standard variety for use for writing and for formal discourse and this was largely adhered to in the past. However, in recent times, pockets of disagreements over the standard variety have emerged from some amateur writers and people who want to cling to clan supremacy. Their major fear is that the selection of one variety over others means the gradual extinction of those other varieties. Arguments to the effect that dialectal variations can be reflected even as synonyms whenever the need arises is slow in sinking in. As a result, many recent writers are writing materials unreadable by others, a major setback for literacy in any language.

A third concern of corpus planning is modernization which goes hand-in-hand with codification. Modernization involves the expansion of the lexicon and development of terminologies which make it possible for a language to cope with more domains of use such as in higher levels of education, science and technology, the social media, the legislature, etc. including translations of materials from other languages. Some of the new terms may come from original creations or borrowings from other languages but they need to be standardized using terminology development strategies recognized by the language. Codification involves the systematic organization, documentation, and production of written materials of various types in the language and making them available both in hard and soft copies. Sadly, more than 80 years after Urhobo was committed to writing with an available standard variety and orthography, not much progress has been made in this area. Although there are some primers and short storybooks in bookshops, there are no longer texts such as novels, drama/poetry books and other serious texts for use beyond the Junior Secondary School (JSS) level. Some of the reasons for this situation include the poor attitude of native speakers to the use of Urhobo beyond the spoken form and a serious apathy towards reading and writing in the language.

2.3 Acquisition Planning

Acquisition planning has to do with developing a language to the extent that it can be successfully used in the educational system of the state/nation. It involves the development of two resources, namely, teaching/learning materials as well as other critical infrastructure and capacity building of

personnel. Much has been said about the shortage of teaching/ learning materials in both quality and quantity. Capacity building deals with ensuring that teachers are well trained and exist in adequate number. Urhobo is currently taught as an academic discipline at the College of Education, Warri, for the National Certificate in Education (NCE) and at the Delta State University, Abraka, where it combines with Linguistics for the Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) Honours degree. It is also one of the eight languages approved for NCE and diploma programmes at the National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN), Aba. However, because of poor attitude towards its study by both prospective students and their parents, the number of applicants who register to study Urhobo at the tertiary level each year is abysmally low. It is also noteworthy that admission into the Urhobo programmes is often based on general admission requirements into the Arts/Humanities since it does not feature at the Senior Secondary School Certificate (SSSC) level. As a result, available students are ill-equipped for the tertiary level, a situation that also affects the number and quality of teachers in the school system, not to talk of other areas of need.

2.4 Identity Planning

Of the four language planning strategies put forward by Emenanjo (2010) that we are examining in this paper, identity planning is the only non-linguistic strategy. It has to do with establishing a strong positive attitude and loyalty towards a language and its standard variety especially in writing. The key players here are the native speakers. They must resist the temptation to surrender to forces of urbanization that necessitate contact with languages of wider communication and sociolinguistic vitality such as English and/or NP in the Nigerian context. Such contacts often lead to language shift, endangerment, and ultimate death of the smaller language. Native speakers must ensure that their language is promoted and used in all domains of communication including education, the media and other public domains and they must desist from excessive loyalty to individual dialects in writing. In the case of Urhobo, the people generally identify themselves as one people and, as noted in Section 2.2, they are fairly unanimous in accepting the Agbarho dialect as its standard variety used for formal inter/intra-group discourse and for education and the media. However, the level of this loyalty is inadequate for the maintenance and spread of the language. Fewer parents these days, especially among the elites, use Urhobo as their home language to communicate with their children even where both parents are Urhobo and use it for

their own conversations, preferring to use English or NP with their children. The result is that there is less of intergenerational transfer which is a sign that the Urhobo language is threatened and on the path to its death if the trend is not arrested.

In the course of writing this paper, forty randomly selected but educated Urhobo parents drawn from among the staff of the Delta State University, Abraka were interviewed. The purpose was to find out which language among Urhobo, English and NP they used as the main home language and also, their preferred dialect for writing Urhobo. The responses showed that only five parents, that is, 12.5% used Urhobo as the main home language; 25 parents, that is, 62.5% used English, while the remaining 10 parents, that is, 25% used a mixture of English, NP and Urhobo depending on who they were conversing with, although there was more English when conversing with their children. Also, eight parents, that is, 20% insisted on the use of their dialect for writing in the language. This ties up with a personal observation that many Urhobo people identify themselves first by the name of their clans before adding Urhobo, even outside Urhoboland. This excessive loyalty to clan/dialect rather than to the entire nation state needs to be addressed and the attention of the Urhobo Progress Union (UPU) has been called to it but little is being done about it. Identity planning needs to be vigorously pursued to ensure the promotion of positive sociolinguistic vitality as the major languages and some smaller languages have effectively done.

3. Contributions of the Urhobo Studies Association (USA) to the Development of Urhobo Language

The USA was formed at the Delta State University (DELSU), Abraka, sometime in 2005 with the coming together of some senior academics, notably Professors Aguonorobor Eruvbetine of the University of Lagos, Tanure Ojaide of the University of North Carolina, U.S.A., (both of whom were on Sabbatical leave at DELSU at the time), Professor G. G. Darah and some other academic and non-teaching staff. It was housed by the Department of Languages and Linguistics and the then Head of the department was appointed the Convener. The vision was to pool together academics, researchers and writers on any field of study related to Urhoboland and its people so as to report on their research or creative works, document them properly, harness and disseminate them locally and internationally for educational and other purposes. It was the view that Urhobo was not functioning well in education. Also, there existed in Urhoboland a quantum of

undocumented literary, material, scientific and technological resources which needed to be tapped and harnessed to become part of the global knowledge resources.

The first major project completed by the USA in 2015 was the development and production of a standard curriculum approved by both the Federal and Delta State governments for teaching/learning Urhobo at the 9-year Basic Education level. The project was done in collaboration with the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), Abuja, the Federal Government agency charged with the responsibility of developing teaching/learning materials for the Nigerian school system. The production of the curriculum has encouraged some writers to publish some standard learning materials. However, Delta State government has shown little interest towards promoting the teaching/learning of Urhobo largely because it lacks the political will to promote one out of the eleven state languages.

A second major contribution of the USA to the development of Urhobo is the floating of a journal, *ARIDON International Journal of Urhobo Studies*, for the publication of quality research works on any field related to Urhobo people and life, including comparative studies. It was conceived as an annual publication and appeared first in 2014.

Another contribution that is noteworthy is the organization of hands-on workshops during the long vacation for serving teachers of Urhobo in both primary and secondary schools. The aim was to help resolve issues related to the teaching/learning of the language as well as the production of written materials for the school system. In August 2019, the first of these workshops held with over 400 teachers and other interested participants not only from Urhobo land but also from Lagos, Abuja, Aba, Nsukka, etc. Sponsorship for the workshop was received from another notable Urhobo son, Engr. Moses Kragha who also launched a primer together with an audio version for the teaching/learning of Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and Urhobo. The workshop turned out to be more successful than envisaged. Unfortunately, the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic prevented the 2020 edition from taking place. It is hoped that the 2021 edition would.

The current focus for the USA is the development of a curriculum for the teaching of Urhobo at the senior secondary school level and its approval as an examinable subject with the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) and National Examinations Council (NECO) for the final school

certificate examinations. This project would require a lot of expertise as well as financial and technical support to achieve the desired result. It is hoped that Urhobo people from all walks of life and with different skills and knowledge base would rally round the USA to achieve this.

4. Conclusion

Education is the bedrock of any positive transformation of individuals and society. Any fundamental change in the intellectual and social outlook of a society, be it political, economic, social, and cultural, must be preceded by a revolution in its educational system. The instrument for carrying out education is language but to achieve good results, the language of education should not be alien to the majority of the people. Urhobo is the language of most people in Urhoboland and it can and should feature prominently in education from the initial years, as provided for in the *NPE*. However, it needs to be empowered by both government and its native speakers to enable it improve on its present status and make it more functional in education for better societal development.

5. Recommendations

A few recommendations are made below to better empower Urhobo (and by extension other non-major Nigerian languages) to make it more functional in the school system:

1. The Urhobo people being the owners of the language must show greater commitment towards the survival and development of their language.
2. The Delta State government must without further delay follow the examples of other state governments to domesticate the provisions already articulated in the *NPE* and the *Constitution* to make Urhobo more functional in the lives of the people beyond the home. It is common knowledge that no society has been known to develop meaningfully through over-dependence on a foreign language in its educational system.
3. An Urhobo Writers Association with the major aim of pulling together creative writers who can produce standard literacy and numeracy texts in all subjects and for all levels of education needs to be formed urgently. Such an association can solicit for funds from well-

meaning individuals and groups for the publication of quality works and for organizing writing workshops and competitions with attractive prizes to boost the quality and quantity of literacy and numeracy materials in the language and for use in the school system.

Notes

1. This paper has benefitted immensely from the comments of its reviewers. The author is grateful to them for enriching the quality of the paper. The author takes responsibility for inconsistencies.
2. Professor Obiajulu A. Emejulu is the current Executive Director of the National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN) and a scholar of Igbo studies.
3. Chief Ugheteni was a member of the Urhobo Language Committee when the orthography was reviewed in 1954. He was the author of the popular *Yono Urhobo Series* (a set of primers used for teaching Urhobo in schools)

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