

## THE SYMBIOSIS OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE STUDY: THE IGBO EXAMPLE

### **Introduction**

The study of a foreign language is often done as a result of its academic, cultural, economic and political importance. Countries that promote foreign language programmes in their educational curricula invariably do so as a matter of national interest. Take for instance, the study of the French language in Nigeria was intensified for some reasons shortly after independence in 1960. Thereafter, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to which Nigeria belongs as one of the founding members, were formed in 1963 and 1975, respectively. But for quite some time, there has been gross dissatisfaction with the educational system that operated in Nigeria and that is at the level of teaching and learning indigenous languages and literatures in secondary schools in the country. This may not be peculiar to Nigeria. Most of the secondary schools where these indigenous languages are taught deprive the students the full knowledge of the culture of the language group. You cannot study a language of a particular group without knowing their culture. This is because most human behaviours are language-embedded, thus language is an inevitable part of culture. In support of this, Adam Kuper and Jessica Kuper (1996:452) say that:

Language is, therefore, not only part of culture but also a major and crucial part. All those who seek fully to enter into and understand a given culture must, accordingly, master its language, for only through that language can they possibly participate in and experience the culture.

Language itself is a part of culture and every language provides an index of the culture with which it is most intimately associated. Mayhead (1965) very aptly addresses this when he states that

literature "helps to preserve the precision and therefore the vitality of language".

It is in view of the above background that this paper considers it pertinent to put up a study to determine how to widen the scope of teaching and learning the major Nigerian languages and their literatures in different secondary schools and tertiary institutions of Nigeria.

### Discussion

In a bid to improve the lot of the Nigerian indigenous languages by widening the scope of their studies in Nigerian schools, especially at the secondary and tertiary levels, the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), with the approval of the Federal Ministry of Education, in 1985 came up with a new syllabus that accords a separate and independent status to language and literature, thus making the Igbo language and the Igbo literature two separate and independent subjects of study for the Senior Certificate Examination (SSCE). Onyekaonwu (1999;1) says, "the practical application of this new syllabus is, from inception, greeted with some abuse, arising from certain policy misinterpretation by the practitioners, thus plunging into a big crisis, the teaching and learning of Igbo in our secondary schools". Prior to 1985, every Nigerian child who passed through the secondary school read his vernacular literature when the subject was incorporated into the language examination. At that time, Efik, Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba examination comprised two papers: Paper I - Language, and Paper II - Literature, Customs and Institutions. During this time, these two components were inseparable, and as such, no student dared neglect any aspect, for doing so meant failure in that subject. This was the practice up till the '80s. For instance, the WAEC syllabuses (1984:380-381) for School Certificate and G.C.E. Ordinary and Advanced level examinations covered all the aspects of Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo languages and literatures for all WASCE candidates up till 1984 at least.

But as from 1985, according to Nwadike, "the tide changed when the Federal Ministry of Education, which is the designer and custodian of the School Certificate Curriculum, separated literature,

customs and institutions from the language examination, and each became a separate subject, language being made compulsory and literature optional". Each subject now has two papers: Essays and Objectives. As soon as this was done, many students, teachers and principals, especially those who prefer foreign languages to their mother tongues, institutionalized the language aspect to the utter neglect and detriment of literature, which is optional. Today, as stated by Nwadike (1999), the position is the near-death of literature in Nigerian languages. Novels, plays, poetry, customs and institutions are no longer studied in about 90% of our schools. Sanya (1998:52) also observes that most candidates, especially in the Abeokuta metropolis of Ogun State who probably do not see much need in sitting for two separate subjects in Yoruba studies, now decide to register for one of the two. In most cases, the students prefer the language, which is a core subject to the literature, which is optional.

He suggests reasons why students favour the Yoruba language to the detriment of the literature. These include the fact that most pupils have no interest in studying literature because of its reference to oral literature, which partially exalts traditional religion as against their beliefs or religious faith. Again, there are too many texts on written prose, drama, written and oral poetry, which encumber the pupils, making the coverage of the syllabus an arduous task. Moreover, there is no appreciable duration for the usage of particular selected texts. This makes parents keep buying new titles at exorbitant prices, almost each time their ward wants to sit for the SSCE. The most striking reason the students gave is 'No institution of higher learning makes a pass grade in SSCE Yoruba literature a prerequisite for candidates' admission to read Yoruba studies. And lastly, the number of teachers recruited is very low compared to the large size of the classes, with each class having several arms, ranging between four and eight. Because of the above reasons the number of students registering to sit for Yoruba literature has been dwindling. This is also the case with Igbo literature.

What is the study of language without the study of its literature? No language would be said to have been roundly studied

without adequate exposure to both the grammar and the literature aspects of it. The total separation of literature from language has adversely affected the learning of Igbo literature in our secondary and tertiary institutions today. Students in secondary schools are discouraged from studying subjects which they will not register for examination. For this reason, no provision whatsoever is made for Igbo literature in our school timetable as is done for literature in English.

It is a fact that the beauty and richness of any language is fully appreciated through the literature of the language just as the nuances and the art of such language is captured in the day-to-day application of that language by its users and not through its grammar. From this premise therefore, it is seen that by studying the grammar of any language alone and neglecting the study of the literature, the knowledge of that language is incomplete and unbalanced and any student who acquired such one-sided education is half-baked. We will be steadily killing the language when we teach our students in the secondary school only the grammar of a language while considering the teaching of the literature unnecessary.

### **The Fate of Indigenous Language Studies in our Schools**

Here, we want to examine the fate of indigenous language studies in most of our schools - secondary or tertiary. It is quite noticeable in our educational institutions that students are not keen in learning any of the major indigenous languages, especially Igbo. One contributory factor is the fact that they are not motivated enough by at least being exposed to the cultural setting and the importance of such language of study.

Some of these languages are studied scientifically but superficially, thereby leaving the students with little or no real knowledge of the said language. English and French would turn out to be both the first and second languages or even the third language acquired by a child. Let us make haste while the sun shines in warring against this indifference over indigenous language studies. Once the villages, clans, and the non-literate men and

women begin to lose grip with these languages, like the literate and anglicized cosmopolitan people, then the fate of most of these languages would be irrevocably sealed.

A closer study of the Igbo language in the Igbo part of Nigeria will reveal what we now have as 'Engligbo'. No educated Igbo man today can make a complete Igbo sentence that is unadulterated with English words or phrases, even where there is no need for such an adulteration. Here are a few examples of the notorious corruption of Igbo, which are recorded by Okonkwo (1971:1),

1. *Olee mgbe ụmụ school ga areturn to school?*

When will the students return to school?

2. *Azuta m game dress John.*

I have bought John's game dress.

3. *Teacher ha si na any student akwuzughị fee ya na a ga-eme ya expel.*

The teacher said that if any student does not pay his/her fees, he/she would be expelled.

These sentences are indefensible for they could be completely and beautifully expressed in pure Igbo. Yet, they are typical of the educated Igbo man. Let us rise and salvage our languages before the very force of 'official language' destroys them.

It is clear from the foregoing that Igbo language studies need an urgent new direction for the obvious reasons that at this point, the teaching and learning of language and literature should be considered as one of the formal models for any language study. Pupils and students should be exposed to the literature of any language under study as well as be allowed to sit for the two as one paper in any entrance examination. If language and literature must be two separate papers, children should be encouraged to register the literature aspect in the entrance examination for it has the same status as language.

The school authorities, especially the State School Management Boards in Igbo land as well as the principals and other relevant organs and practitioners in the secondary schools have misinterpreted and misapplied the new syllabus as they insist on the students registering only Igbo grammar/language aspect for

their examinations and no more. This position taken by these school authorities has adversely affected the teaching and learning of Igbo literature in our secondary schools today, for it discourages the students from studying subjects which they will not register for examination. As for this position, no provision whatsoever is made for Igbo literature in our school timetable as is done for literature in English.

Universities should help matters by accepting children who have credit in the literary aspect instead of rejecting them thereby frustrating the children as well as devaluing the importance of literature. A situation where only the grammar/ language is studied to the total exclusion of the study of the literature is, to say the least, the greatest injustice and disservice done to the wellbeing and promotion of such language. Onyekaonwu (1999:5) suggests another implication of this which people do not readily foresee:

when it calls for making it compulsory that candidates who will be admitted to do Igbo in the universities should have credit in the language as well as in the literature as presently provided in the condition for admitting candidates to do English in the universities, we discover that none of the present candidates being prepared by our secondary schools will qualify for such admission.

### **The Role of Literature in Language Teaching**

Rather than learning a language only through its grammar as conceived by the school authorities, learning a language through its literature should be seen as a complementary approach. According to Emenanjo (1995:5),

Language is conceived as raw material for the creation of literature. The literary artist has the capacity and capability of building domes of aesthetic pleasure with the blocks of language in the form of sounds, words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, short stories, novels, plays or poems. The literary artist is a linguist.

Language learning therefore, will be more effective if the literature in the same language is also being learned, since literature will provide the opportunity to put the language into use and if language is not utilized in this way and for this purpose, it will suffer

the effect of disuse. Literature helps to preserve the precision and therefore, the vitality of language. To Ukaegbu (1998:164), "language and literature are inter-related in such a way that one cannot be divorced from the other. As such, if literature in Nigerian language is neglected, we cannot achieve any desired goal in the education process and national development".

No language can grow and develop extensively if it is not employed for creative writing. If it does grow, the rate at which it grows would be slow. The importance of literature to man cannot be overemphasized. For instance, in a classroom setting, the teaching and learning mood of literature is that of relaxation. The entire atmosphere is tension-free because literature is an invaluable source of entertainment or enjoyment. This is quite unlike the teaching and learning mood in language study, which is usually pursued with much tensed nerve on the part of the teacher and the students because of the prescriptive and technical nature of the subject. Once the two are studied together the issue of incomplete and unbalanced knowledge of Igbo language will cease. Moreover, our students will then acquire full language education. Suffice it to say that language and literature are mutually inter-dependent and this fact has to be taken into account in effective language learning. Literature amplifies the culture of a group by the use of language, and culture itself, according to Kalu (1978; as quoted by Ekwealor, 1998),

provides society with inherited transmissible code of conduct as both part and function of the total system of ideas, values, knowledge, philosophy, law, moral and belief systems which constitute the content of life of a society. Culture provides order and guidance for social behaviour and stability amidst rapid change.

Much as culture provides the values listed in the above quotation, there is need to ensure the utility and continuity of these values through understanding and sharing of information and knowledge. It is pertinent to point out here however, that learning and sharing a culture very much depend on effective use of language; and language can be most effectively used through imaginative literature. Following the *National Policy on Education* (NPE 1981), the importance

of language in the educational process is reiterated in its function as "a means of preserving the people's culture". The study of Igbo literature will be a means of preserving Igbo culture for posterity. This is, no doubt, applicable to the literature of other Nigerian languages.

Literature helps to socialize a child. He gets information via literature about the peculiar history of his people as well as their peculiar experiences. This will help him to adjust and live his life in a manner acceptable to his society. Mayhead (1965) affirms that 'literature does not make a child anti-social rather it can equip him to lead his life among his people with an adequacy, satisfaction and understanding he would not otherwise have known'. Literature, according to Emenanjo (1995:6), is sourced from human society. As a result, it draws its subject matter from the interactions between man and his fellow human beings. Literature, he further noted, deals with all ideas and ideals possible, all virtues and vices imaginable, all fears and frustrations conceivable. As such, literature draws all its characters from human society. For instance, the character and themes of literature texts reveal the philosophy of a given society. For instance, in *Okpa Aku Eri Eri* by Odilora (1981), Akubuzo is portrayed as a stiff character, that is too hard to be true to life. Chukuezi's *Udo Ka Mma* (1974) portrays the peaceful way of settling disputes in Igbo society with its theme "Let peace reign". Moreover texts such as *Mmiri Oku E Ji Egbu Mbe* (1974) and *Ukpana Okpoko Buuru* (1975) by Tony Ubesie portray the activities of robbers and the consequences involved in such vices. Reading these literatures in secondary schools will help in moulding and building the character of youths since they are still in their formative years. Also the Igbo philosophy of life will be inculcated in them by exposing them to the study of proverbs, idioms, riddles, tongue twisters, the social values, norms, customs, culture, etc. For instance, the proverb "Egbe bere Ubo bere nke si ibe ya ebela, nku kwapu ya" (Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch, the one that does not want the other to perch, let the wings clip) shows the Igbo philosophy of life that teaches "live and let live".



So far we have seen that literature has a lot more intrinsically and permanently valuable to offer apart from studying it for the purpose of examination. So let us appreciate the need for sustaining the teaching and learning of this subject as well as appreciate the disastrous consequences of allowing the subject to die off merely because the study of the grammar of the language is chosen in preference. A language learner who learns through the grammar of the language learns the language away from its natural habitat and in abstraction while a learner who learns the language directly from the daily usage of the language learns it in its natural habitat. Through the peoples' discussions, conversations, debates, songs, story-telling, the learner captures the language along with the art of its usages - art of conversation, art of story telling, art of speech making and use of figures of speech such as proverbs, idioms, metaphors and similes, anecdotes, personifications, etc.

From the foregoing discussion, it should be clear that a people's language is the custodian of their literature and that a people's literature is the custodian of their way of life, philosophy, history, customs and institutions, consciousness, emotions, feasts and celebrations, etc. So, when we concentrate on teaching our students the grammar of the Igbo language and avoid encouraging them to read books on Igbo literature - poems, drama and prose forms - we are not helping them at all; rather we are also killing the Igbo language. There are registered terminologies peculiar to literature, especially the stylistic devices often employed by poets and artists, which will elude them, and they will begin to feel that Igbo studies is too difficult. They will end up mixing the Igbo language with either English or strange slangs. Also, the rich cultures of the people, which ride on the wings of literary language, become alien to them.

### **Some Selected Suggestions**

Having examined the haphazard nature of language study in our educational institutions, this writer suggests guidelines for developing a meaningful language study. First, there is need to produce professionally qualified teachers for effective implementation of the language and literature curricula/syllabus.

The courses should be well spelt out and emphasized in the National Language Policy. Students studying the grammar of any language should also study the literature as a matter of compulsion, especially those who intend to study the language in the university. This is more advantageous to prospective linguists.

Secondly, principals, teachers and students should be educated on the adverse effects of studying only language without studying literature. Teachers should make their literature lessons more interesting to attract more patronage. Sufficient periods should be allocated to literature in the school timetable to enable the students to cover the prescribed textbooks.

Thirdly, higher institutions should beef up their entry qualifications for any of the Nigerian indigenous language studies to include a pass in the equivalent literature.

Fourthly, specialist teachers in literature and literary criticism should be trained to teach these languages and their literatures. These teachers should make the students develop interest in literature by exposing them to literary works on video cassettes and tapes.

Fifthly, language and literature should be merged in the SSCE as one paper. Also, the duration of the selected texts should be extended to last for at least, ten years. This will help to curb the problem of parents buying new texts for their children every now and then because these texts are changed from time to time.

## Conclusion

It is pertinent to note that language and literature are interrelated and interdependent. Thus a literary artist is also a linguist. The implication is that language cannot be taught in isolation from its literature component, otherwise the set goal on national policy on language will not be realized. Language and literature are fundamental to the civilization of a people. Considering the importance of literature in education, its continued survival in the Senior Secondary setting should be taken with all seriousness. It is pertinent to note that Igbo literature has the capacity to grow with the study of Igbo language at all levels of the Nigerian education

system, provided that adequate attention is given to the literature aspect, especially at the secondary school level. This will help in the proper development of complete Igbo students and other Nigerian languages students at large.

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