

# Use of English in heritage language classrooms in Lagos, Nigeria: a sociolinguistic inquiry on language in education

**Dr. Osita Gerald Nwagbo**

University of Lagos, Nigeria

## **Abstract**

Research on Second Language Acquisition in Africa have mainly focused on learning L2 (English/French) by children who have acquired L1, with little or no attention paid to learning a heritage language as L2 by children who have acquired English as L1. Consequently, the present study examines the learning outcomes of Igbo (major language in Nigeria) children who learn their heritage language in school in multilingual Lagos State, Nigeria, with a view to exploring the use of English as instructional tool in the context of indigenous language teaching. Based on this objective, the research poses three questions: what is the rationale for using English to teach Igbo and the implications? What means do teachers apply to motivate their students' interest in Igbo? Do teachers perceive themselves as indigenous language models to their students? Skinner's (1938) Operant Conditioning Theory was used as guide. Through stratified/random sampling, three bilingual secondary schools in Lagos State were selected; for each school, one Igbo teacher, and 5 students of Igbo ethnic group, studying Igbo were selected. Using case study design, this qualitative study adopted interview and participant observation to elicit information. The result shows that in the classroom, teachers used English-based code-switching as pedagogical device for clarifications, to maintain students' attention, and to facilitate seamless interaction with students who are more proficient in English than Igbo. Consequently, the students imitated their teachers' English-based code switching patterns in class, and the pervasive use of English militated against students' proficiency in Igbo. Teachers adopted positive reinforcements such as applause and handshake to motivate students in speaking, reading and writing. However, there were little or no materials and objects to stimulate Igbo learning in the school environment. Across the sampled schools, Igbo was taught in classrooms replete with posters and objects in English and none in Igbo, thus weakening stimuli. Furthermore, teachers did not identify themselves as Igbo language models, but as supporters of students' parents who are traditionally positioned to transmit heritage language to their children. It is posited that heritage language should be taught in the heritage language by Igbo teaching models and holistic stimulants provided to foster learning.

**Keywords:** Igbo, Second language acquisition, English, Lagos, operant conditioning