

From Mother Tongue towards English: An Assessment of Language Shift and the Ethnolinguistic Vitality of the Igbo Language

Okoro, Gladys Onyinyechi
Department of General Studies
Imo State Polytechnic,
Umuagwo
g.okoroonyinyechi@yahoo.com

Abstract

Language shift is a process which may lead speakers to use their language in fewer domains with respect to another language or even lose proficiency in their language altogether in favour of another language. Among the various consequences of globalization that is most alarming to linguists is the high rate of disappearance of languages worldwide. Several reasons have been advanced by linguists to explicate why people shift from their own culture and language. In the Nigerian context, the English language is regarded as a second language (L2) yet it occupies an enviable position in Nigeria's linguistic repertoire. However, this research was geared towards investigating language shift among Igbo bilinguals in Owerri Metropolis in order to find out the vitality of the Igbo language and the burden of the study was to establish the attitude of the native speakers of Igbo to their language. Consequently, the research was guided by three research questions, using structured questionnaires. One hundred and twenty respondents were selected for study. The data got were analyzed with mean calculation and 2.5 were the criteria mean score for acceptance. The findings revealed that the Igbo people still have a positive attitude to their language; that there is no significant shift from L1 to L2 and that Igbo language still has a high level of vitality despite the quest for modernization and globalization of the English language in Nigeria. However, the researcher recommends that more Igbo grammar books be written to promote and enhance the learning of Igbo language in Nigeria.

Key words: *language, language shift, ethnolinguistic vitality, bilinguals, mother-tongue, globalization*

Introduction

Language is highly valued in every society as it serves as a medium of communication. It is important to the human society as it reflects every facet of our attitude and activities. It is a symbol of group identity and solidarity. According to Wardhaugh (2000:116), 'Language is both an individual possession and a social possession'. Linguists all over the world believe that every language is a mark of group identification and cannot be thrown overboard with regard to the attitudes, philosophy and culture of the people (Lyons, 1968:9; Pearson, 1977:10). People of different origins have always been strongly bound together by their language and culture. According to Obioha (2007:6), it is worrisome that of all the Nigerian major languages, Igbo has been singled out as the only one under serious threat of extinction in the future. Igbo is an endangered language sitting somewhere between unsafe and definitely endangered on the language vitality index (Emenanjo, 2015:19).

It is pertinent to note here that parents whether literate or illiterate would rather speak English to their children than Igbo. The children grow up regarding Igbo as an inferior language. Many Igbo children born outside Igbo speaking environments like Lagos, Abuja

and Port-Harcourt take pride in saying that they cannot speak their mother tongue. According to Okere (2015:1):

Igbo is dying from neglect, from lack of use, from a growing lack of speakers, from not being committed to writing, from lack of application to modern life and from utter lack of will to bequeath it to the next and future generations.

The ability to speak the foreign language has suddenly become a status symbol, the English and French Languages are gaining more grounds in Nigeria, a country where majority cannot read or write English yet all official documents including the constitution of the country are written in English. In the Nigerian schools, speaking the mother tongue has become a taboo; in most cases teachers equate such practices with savagery and primitive thoughts. In social interactions, businesses, sciences, the English language has taken over with full force. A university student would be proud to say that he is studying English or French but would be ashamed to admit that he is studying an indigenous language. Students are no longer eager to take up Igbo Language Studies except it is the last resort, or it is called Linguistics and Igbo, English/Igbo or African Studies. God has endowed people of the world with different languages and culture but somewhere along the line, people lose grip of these God-given talents and gifts.

In the world of today, to write and read Igbo has become a major challenge to the owners of the Igbo language. In most cases, Igbo language and culture have suffered great neglect and abuse even by the elite who in the first instance should champion the course. The Igbo speakers are not helping matters, in the way they speak the language with a lot of code-mixing and code-switching which has given rise to what is generally called Engligbo – some admixture of Igbo and English. According to Anyanwu (2002:39): ‘a mixture of English and Igbo, derogatorily referred to as Engligbo by the Igbo themselves has ceased to be a language of the uneducated and has almost completely become the exclusive preserve of the educated elite....’

Statement of the Problem

There is massive change in work structure of African countries as the world globalizes, and this has been catalytic to the language endangerment of their vernaculars. In Nigeria, language shift can be located in a change of the language of work of the ethnicities from the vernacular to English. However, most Nigerian children and youth are unknowledgeable about their linguistic backgrounds and feel inferior and inadequate about them. The youth prefer to speak to each other in English or pidgin and do not see the danger of losing their mother tongue (MT). Their mothers now speak English and their ancestral languages have become ‘grandmother tongues’.

Africans, especially the Igbo exhibit negative attitudes towards their language, refuse to speak it and unconsciously prepare it towards extinction. It has become trendy to speak English in both urban and rural areas. According to Osuafor (2005:217): ‘even illiterate parents forcefully intersperse the vernacular, they must speak English expressions and stubbornly apply themselves to the accepted and civilized form of expression’.

Also, in the new curriculum for WASSCE, Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba are no longer compulsory subjects for secondary school students as stipulated in the NPE. Hence, there is need for Igbo bilinguals to preserve and maintain their language in order to avoid language loss.

Aim/Objectives of the Study

The aim of this research is to carry out a sociolinguistic study of language shift among Igbo bilinguals in Owerri Metropolis in order to investigate the ethnolinguistic vitality of the Igbo language. The study therefore investigates the following specific objectives:

- i. The attitude of Igbo bilinguals towards their mother tongue.
- ii. Whether there is any proof of shift from L1 to L2 among Igbo bilinguals.
- iii. Whether Igbo language has high ethnolinguistic vitality given the attitude of its native speakers.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the study:

1. What is the attitude of Igbo bilinguals in Owerri towards their mother tongue?
2. Is there any proof of shift from L1 to L2 among Igbo bilinguals in Owerri?
3. What is the ethnolinguistic vitality of Igbo Language given the attitude of its native speakers in Owerri?

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the framework of ethnolinguistic vitality (EV). Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1977) proposed the model of ethnolinguistic vitality as a framework for mother tongue (MT) maintenance, language shift and loss. The vitality of an ethnolinguistic group was defined as ‘that which makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup situations’ (Giles, et. al; 1977:38).

According to Giles et. al. (1977), Status, Demographic, Institutional Support and Control factors combine to make up the vitality of ethnolinguistic groups. A group’s strengths and weaknesses in each of these domains could be assessed so as to provide a rough classification of ethnolinguistic groups as having low, medium, or high vitality. It is argued that low vitality groups are most likely to go through linguistic assimilation and ‘cease to exist as a distinctive collectivity’. On the other hand, the high vitality groups are likely to maintain their language and distinctive cultural traits in multilingual settings.

However, in order to take into account the individuals’ perception of the societal conditions influencing them, Bourhis, Giles, and Rosenthal (1981) constructed the Subjective Ethnolinguistic Vitality Questionnaire (SEVQ) to measure how group members actually perceive their own group along important vitality dimensions. The key prediction of ethnolinguistic vitality theory (EVT) is that community languages with high ethnolinguistic vitality will be retained, while those with low EV tend to be replaced by the mainstream language.

The Concept of Language Shift

Language shift occurs when a community is in the process of using more and more of a particular language at the expense of another language. According to Bodomo, Anderson and Dzahene-Quarshie (2010):

Language shift is a process in which successive generations of speakers, both at individual and at community levels, gradually lose proficiency in their mother-tongues or the language of their speech community in favour of other languages. The process may lead to language loss among individuals or even language death for an entire community.

Also, according to Alamu (2010:59):

Language shift occurs when a particular language is replaced by another language or when a language is dislodged and its speakers depart from using it. When this happens, the language is lost, the culture of the people and their identity are lost. This is because it is through language that culture can be expressed.

These days, as a result of globalization, many people clamour for the English language in place of their native language and in the end, they are neither competent nor functionally literate in their native tongue. Obviously, in some speech communities, there is the existence of language shift, or assimilation, endangerment or even death. There is uncertainty as regards the total number of languages used in the world up till date. Kujuru (1999:38) quoted numerous sources to amount to 4, 000 to 6,000 languages. According to Finegan (2012:3), 'it seems safe to stick with the conventional wisdom that there are close to 7000 languages in use in the world.' Nevertheless, strong proofs abound to show that there is a global disappearance of languages in a high rate. History has repeatedly demonstrated that 'language shift is the rule, not the exception' (Edwards, 1985: 16).

The abandonment of a language is tantamount to its disappearance. Linguists say that endangered languages are chiefly found in countries and continents such as America, Australia and Africa. However, in the above mentioned, some native tongues have disappeared without traces. Many are facing extinction while many others are no longer being transmitted to the younger generation. For instance, the Caribbean territories lost ancestral languages to the European colonial vernacular tagged creole (Dugga, 2004:34). The most explicit way of defining language shift according to Kindell (1994:110) is that more and more ethnolinguistic groups are shifting allegiance from their original language to another when offered more power and opportunities. This situation engenders loss of linguistic diversity.

Crystal (1987:360) stated that language shift is a case where speakers have assimilated themselves to the dominant culture. Other possibilities include extensive vocabulary borrowing by one of the languages or the emergence of a new "hybrid" as a result of the contact as with pidgin and creole.

Causes of Language Shift

The most obvious factor for language shift is that the community sees an important reason for learning the second language. According to Holmes (2008:60):

The reasons are often economic, but they may also be political- as in the case of Israel. Obtaining work is the most obvious economic reason for learning another language. In English-dominated countries, for instance, people learn English in order to get good jobs.

The second factor is that the community sees no reason to maintain their native language. They may not realize that it is in any danger of disappearing or may not see it as offering any advantages to their children. For instance, where a migrant minority group moves to a predominantly monolingual society dominated by one majority group language in all the major institutional domains- school, television, radio, newspapers, government administration, court, work- language shift will be unavoidable unless the community takes active steps to prevent it. Very often, without consciously deciding to abandon their ethnic language, a community will lose it because they did not perceive any threat.

Demographic factors are also relevant in accounting for the speed of language shift.

Resistance to language shift tends to last longer in rural than in urban areas. This is partly a reflection of the fact that rural groups tend to be isolated from the centres of political power for longer, and they can meet most of their social needs in the ethnic or minority language. According to Holmes (2008:61), 'because of their relative social isolation, Ukrainians in Canada who live out of town, on farms have maintained their ethnic language better than those in the towns.

The attitudes of a community toward her language can contribute to language shift. The Igbo people portray negative attitudes toward their language. Commenting on the negative attitudes of the Igbo people to their language, Osuafor (2002:186) laments that:

Even in the tertiary institutions it is heart bugging to notice the attitudinal misplacement of linguistic and cultural values as learners and teachers of the indigenous languages are ridiculed as those who belonged to the backdoor of the academia.

The attitude of people towards the Igbo language and culture affects teaching and learning of the Igbo language and culture in all levels of education. Buttressing this, Ngerem (2015:39) laments that:

Students shy away from making their career choice on Igbo language because their parents, family members, friends and the members of the society look down on them as lazy and un-brilliant students. Those who decided to make Igbo a career do not feel proud to claim wholeheartedly to be Igbo students.

In Grimes' (2001:32) opinion,

Parents push their children to learn prestigious languages'. They at times decide not to speak their mother tongue to their children because they perceive an economic or educational advantage for their children. This class of parents gets offended with teachers who teach Igbo as a subject to their children.

Igbo language cannot be more important than the speakers' value on it.

Ejiofo (20013:48) also laments on the negative attitude of Igbo people to their language. According to him:

... o bughi naani asusu Bekee ka otutu n' ime unu na-asuru umu unu n' ime ulo, ma ndi Yoruba na Awusa unu na ha bi na yaadi na-asuru umu ha asusu ha? Ka I hunugo nwata Awusa maobu Yoruba amaghi asusu Awusa maobu Yoruba? I banye n' obodo mepere emepe, I hu na otutu nne na nna ndi Igbo adighizikwa asu asusu Igbo na be ha, nke a mere na otutu umuaka Igbo bi ne Legoosu, Enugu, Onicha, Potakot, Ugwu Awusa, dg, amaghi asuzi Igbo.

(Translation - ... Is it not English that many of you speak to your children even in the home, but the Yoruba and Hausa people living in the same yard with you speak their languages to their children? Have you ever seen an Hausa or a Yoruba child that cannot speak Hausa or Yoruba. When you go to the cities, you will see that many parents no longer use Igbo in their homes. As a result of this, many Igbo children living in Lagos, Enugu, Onitsha, Port Harcourt

and the North etc cannot speak Igbo).

Ejiofo goes further to say that Igbo parents go as far as teaching their children to greet their elders in English and that they are even proud to tell anybody who tries to speak Igbo to their children that ‘Junior does not understand Igbo.’

Osuafor (2005: 214) listed social reasons such as: migration, population, religion, marriage and prestige as factors responsible for language shift in Africa. According to him:

Following the economic predicament of most African States, their citizens migrate to other lands on desperate self or forced exile and get absorbed in the culture of host country or scatter among other communities in their bid for social and economic integration.... the greatest casualty is their cultural values and language which they may not always have the opportunity to speak.

Worse still, is that most of these Western host communities are known to use language differences as one of the basis to segregate against Africans in diaspora. So, Africans prefer not to speak their ancestral languages in Western countries for fear of being segregated against.

In terms of population as an index of shift, it is believed that the number of speakers of a language correlates with its vitality or endangerment. Thus, it has been argued that the indigenous languages are not endangered because many rural dwellers still speak them. But this is an error of locution because the ancestral languages can still be endangered no matter the number of the instant speakers, especially if it is no longer the language of work and education. For instance, languages like Langa, Torbi, Tong spoken in the Nigerian-Cameroon borderland are spoken by less than 1, 000 people, and yet enjoy great vitality (Osuafor, 2005:215).

Religion also offers a social explanation for language shift. The Holy Book (Quran) of the Moslems is written in Arabic while that of the Christians (Holy Bible) is written in English. Even though the Bible has been translated into Igbo language, yet a lot of its speakers: educated and uneducated cannot read in their languages and little or no efforts are made to encourage it.

Interethnic marriage also has an impact on language to shift in various ways. Marriages, in patriarchal societies, require women to be totally assimilated into their husband’s family and language. Just as children acquire their father’s language in spite of their mother’s language, wives speak their husbands’ language as a sign of loyalty, and to enhance the feeling of being better appreciated, understood, trusted and supported. Those who could not are regarded as outsiders. In a situation where the wife cannot speak the language of the husband, especially in urban settings, they normally recourse to English or pidgin (depending on their level of education) the language they both share in common or the language of the immediate community. For instance in an interethnic marriage involving Igbo male or Yoruba female in Lagos, the children are most likely to be Yoruba bilinguals.

The greatest challenge of the Igbo language and culture is the pace of urbanization as well as the increasing rate of urban migration. Okere (2015:3) laments that:

The rush to the towns for office and industrial jobs- Ozibekee- has meant a flight from the village- the deserted village. And the scramble for the towns has not only emptied our villages, the birth place and home of our language, it is in the cities where the purity of the language is being

put to a severe test, indeed severely compromised, as the forces of multiculturalism and commerce force people to resort to some lingua franca, inevitably English or Pidgin.

According to Anumihe (2015:73) ‘the natural Igbo adventurous spirit has always propelled them to seek greener pastures away from home.’ The towns and cities offer great opportunities to Igbo youths, young men and women seeking escape from the harsh realities of unemployment in villages and rural communities. Most of the migrants find accommodation in public yards inhabited by people from different ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups. Consequently, the use of Igbo language as the dominant medium of communication will not be very effective. In such environment, English language and its many varieties are the medium of communication for the multilingual setting.

In the Nigerian situation, English imposes the required patriarchal cultural expectations that are modern economic and social needs of Nigerians, which cause the weak ancestral tongues to suffer shift.

Research Methodology

This study is designed to investigate the attitudes of Igbo bilinguals towards their language, to find out if there is language shift and the vitality of Igbo language given the attitudes of its speakers. The study used a sample size of one hundred and twenty civil servants in Owerri Metropolis. The structured questionnaire was used for the study. The questionnaire contains twenty three items on a four point Likert scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). Items 1-10 focus on the respondents’ attitudes to their mother tongue. Items 11-17 are based on the respondents’ use of the MT at home and place of work while items 18-23 concentrate on the respondents’ forecast of the future of their MT.

The rating of items 1-10 is as follows:

Strongly Agree	-	1 point
Agree	-	2 points
Disagree	-	3 points
Strongly Disagree	-	4 points
Total	-	10 points

This is because of the negative nature of these questions which are not in favour of the MT. On the other hand, items 11-23 are positively cued and rated as follows:

Strongly Agree	-	4 points
Agreed	-	3 points
Disagree	-	2 points
Strongly Disagree	-	1 point
Total	-	10 points

The data got were analyzed using mean calculation and the criterion score for acceptance was the mean score of approximate or equal to 2.5 as calculated below:

$$\text{Mean} = \text{Total number of scores} \text{ i.e.; } \frac{10}{4} = 2.5$$

The questionnaires distributed were completed, and collected by the researcher. Tables were used for easy interpretation of results.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Research Question 1

What is the attitude of Igbo bilinguals in Owerri Metropolis towards their MT?

Note – (F x 4) – frequency x 4, (F x 3) – frequency x 3,

(F x 2) – Frequency x 2, (F x 1) – frequency x 1
 \bar{X} – Mean score

Table 1

S/N		SA (FX1)	A (FX2)	D(FX3)	SD(FX4)	\bar{X}	D
1	It is not worthwhile in terms of resources and time to develop the Igbo language for the use of the internet.	28	32	108	160	2.7	Positive
2	I support the enthronement of English as the language of communication even at home.	12	88	108	112	2.7	Positive
3	I discourage my children from using Igbo often than English.	4	40	132	208	3.2	Positive
4	Igbo children trained solely in Igbo language early in life grow to be deficient in English.	28	40	96	160	2.7	Positive
5	Igbo children trained early in the use of English instead of their MT have advantages over those strained in their MT to face academic challenges	4	112	96	112	2.7	Positive
6	It is a useless exercise organizing seminars and workshops on the promotion of Igbo language and culture.	4	-	84	352	3.7	positive
7	I feel ashamed speaking Igbo language and frequently avoid using it.	16	38	120	180	3	Positive
8.	None of my children was given an Igbo name.	–	8	150	264	3.5	Positive
9	I do not address my children by their Igbo names.	–	12	186	208	3.4	Positive
10	Igbo language is not essential to my community's development and identity.	4	32	120	240	3.3	Positive

Discussion of the Findings

Given the criterion mean of 2.5, table 1 showed that all the items had mean scores that are above 2.5. This means that despite the quest for modernization and the sweeping effects of globalization, it is clear from the table that Igbo people have positive attitude to their language. This is contrary to Osuafor's (2002) and Ejiofo's (2013) view that the Igbo people have negative attitude towards their language. Also, item 3 which sought to find out if parents discourage their children from using their mother tongue has the mean score of 3.2, meaning that parents actually encourage their children to speak Igbo language. However, this contradicts Grimes' (2001) opinion that parents push their children to learn prestigious languages and at times decide not to speak their MT to their children.

Research Question 2

Is there any proof of shift from L1 to L2 among Igbo-English in Owerri Metropolis?

Table 2

S/N		SA (FX4)	A (FX3)	D(FX2)	SD(FX1)	\bar{X}	D
11	I communicate mainly in Igbo with my children.	48	240	56	-	2.9	Positive
12	I use Igbo mainly when communicating with my spouse.	64	240	48	-	2.9	Positive
13	When communicating with my parents, I use Igbo.	256	132	24	-	3.4	Positive
14	I communicate with my Igbo-English bilingual friends in Igbo.	96	156	88	-	2.8	Positive
15	The Igbo language occupies an important position in my vocation.	16	168	104	8	2.5	Positive
16	I can speak, write and read Igbo fluently as much as English.	192	120	64	-	3.1	Positive
17	I expose my children to materials written in Igbo language.	80	150	40	30	2.5	Positive

Discussion of the Findings

Based on the criterion mean of the items in table 2 above, one can say that there is no noticeable shift from L1 to L2 among the Igbo bilinguals studied. Igbo language is still of paramount importance to the Igbo people. It is still the language they use in communicating with their children, parents and friends. However, the fact that Igbo language is spoken in the domestic as well as work domain shows that it is enjoying high linguistic vitality. This is contrary to Okere's (2015) view that 'Igbo is dying from lack of neglect, from lack of use....'

Research Question 3

What is the vitality of Igbo language given the attitude of its native speakers in Owerri?

Table 3

S/N		SA (FX4)	A (FX3)	D(FX2)	SD(FX1)	\bar{X}	D
18	I want my children to start early enough in life to learn and use the Igbo language even at school.	192	132	40	8	3.1	Positive
19	I appreciate the language policy as enshrined in the National Policy on Education (NPE).	192	180	24	-	3.3	Positive
20	Igbo language has the vitality and capacity of replacing English as a National language.	32	84	104	32	2.1	Negative
21	I wish the Igbo language could dethrone the English language as Nigeria's National Language.	32	24	168	20	2	Negative
22	I wish Igbo could become global language.	80	156	64	12	2.6	Positive
23	English is a threat to MT.	192	96	40	20	2.9	Positive

Discussion of the Findings

In table 3 above, items 18, 19, 22 and 23 had their respective mean score which are above 2.5 while 20 and 21 had mean scores below 2.5. The attitudes of the Igbo community to their language show that there is bright hope for the Igbo language despite the quest for English language and its benefits. Even though Igbo language has high linguistic vitality the speakers still value English and believe that Igbo does not have the capacity of replacing English in Nigeria. In answering items 20 and 21, one of the respondents told the researcher that ‘Bekee wu agbara’ (English is very necessary/ important). Another said, ‘How can Igbo dethrone English? It is not possible because English has come to stay’.

Hence, Igbo people should be careful to maintain the allegiance they claim for their language, because the affinity they manifest for the English language outweighs whatever they say they have for their MT. If this is not checked, Obioha’s (2007) worry that Igbo language has been singled out to be under serious threat to extinction in the foreseeable future will become a reality. It is also worthwhile to note that this passion they have for English is motivated by their socio-economic status inclination and other successes in life. Thus, they still see English as the language that has more to offer in terms of economic, educational, social, national and international opportunities and would not want their mother tongue to dethrone it. Hence, they want English to continue to exist alongside their MT.

Conclusion

This paper has looked into the phenomenon of language shift among Igbo bilinguals in Owerri Metropolis in order to determine the vitality of the Igbo language. The findings revealed that despite the effects of globalization of the English language in Nigeria, the Igbo native speakers still cherish, use and strive to preserve their mother tongue. Hence, Igbo language is still stable and has strong vitality yet threatened by English as it has usurped certain important communication contexts.

Recommendations

The Igbo language is the identity of the Igbo and as such should be preserved to maintain its status in Igbo land. Based on this, the researcher recommends that:

- i. More Igbo grammar books, primary and advanced literature should be written to enhance the learning and acquisition of the MT and that Igbo lexicographers should work towards compiling more Igbo words in the Igbo dictionary. There should also be invention of Igbo vocabularies for the English scientific and technological terminologies.
- ii. Igbo writers should be supported through organising writers’ workshops where people are encouraged to write creatively based on cultural resources and institutionalising of awards prizes and other incentives to encourage writers.
- iii. More lectures similar to the Ahiajoku, the Odenigbo and the Ogbalu Memorial lectures should be organized by individuals, groups, Igbo linguists etc. These lectures will aim at globalizing and developing the Igbo culture and language.
- iv. More groups and associations like: Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo, Otu Suwakwa Igbo, and Aka Ikenga which promote the Igbo language and culture should be formed.
- v. Igbo language newspapers such as *Uja Odum* and *Ozisa* should be made to circulate beyond their domains. Also, *Ogene* and *Udoka* that have ceased production should be revived to help in promoting Igbo language.
- vi. The curriculum planners should revise the new curriculum for senior secondary students and give Igbo and other indigenous Nigerian languages their status as compulsory subjects.

- vii. The school heads and all stakeholders of educational matters in Igbophone states should organise debates and quizzes in Igbo language for their students as well as the inclusion of culture exhibition in their curriculum activities.
- viii. The governments of the Igbophone states can empower Igbo by making it co-official with English in these states.
- ix. The government should also ensure the implementation of the National Language Policy which states that the MT or the language of the immediate community should be the language of instruction in the pre-primary and early primary education as stipulated in the National Policy on Education. The National Language Policy should not be on paper alone. School inspectors and all stakeholders are to be involved in making sure that the language policy is followed to the letter.
- x. The state governments of Igbo speaking states should award scholarships to students that have chosen to study Igbo language in tertiary institutions and automatic employment upon graduation.

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