EFFECTS OF LANGUAGE TESTING ON TEACHING AND LEARNING OF IGBO LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Language learning or teaching without testing is like operating an engine of a car, ship or aeroplane without trial-driving. Testing being a process of administering a carefully prepared question in advance for assessment of learners’ language behaviour must accompany language lesson for effective language development. Unfortunately, nowadays most language teachers and developers never take testing their learners serious. Some do not even know the processes of language testing talk less of its application. It is on this consideration that this paper intends to look at the impacts of testing on the teaching and learning of Igbo language. The paper also looks at the different types of objectives in conducting test in Igbo language, kinds of language test and things to bear in mind while administering Igbo language test. Finally, it discusses the essential characteristics of a good language test, gives the advantages of language testing in Igbo and makes recommendations.

Language is one of the factors that distinguish man from animal. The human language is systematic and more organised than that of animal language. Without language, there will be no effective communication between individuals. Teachers of language are like medical practitioners who diagnose language ailments through the use of language test. Infact over the years the quality of language tests have been very poor and inadequate at all levels of the educational system. Some of the language tests given lack reliability and validity. The emphasis of the test has been on the written than on the spoken language. Many scholars have given different definitions on the concepts ‘language and language testing’

Bell (1981:1) defines language as ‘the system of communication in speech and writing articulated sounds, organised by human thought and used by a group of humans for the purpose of communication. This definition shows that when human beings use sounds that are not organised, it is not language but ‘jargon or bla bla bla’. It is the duty of the language teacher to guide especially the second language learner to organise the sounds inorder to make them meaningful in his/her utterance.

Anagbogu, Mbah and Eme (2010:1) define language as ‘a means which human beings have devised for communicating ideas, feelings, emotions and desires etc through complex vocal or written symbols’ From these scholars’ definition of language, it means that human language is not simple, rather it is difficult because it comprises so many parts of speech. Any means by which human beings use to communicate and understand themselves has served as a language.

Anozie (2007:221) asserts that a language test is a device that tries to assess how much has been learned in a foreign language course or some part of a course. Anozie restricted his definition only to a foreign language but test can be done in a learner’s local/native language.

Striven (1980) asserts that many conventional tests given in classes are not appropriate. He says that some are mischievous and unreal. This means that test is not reliable sometimes in measuring learner’s competency in a language. Allen (2009) on the other hand sees language testing as the practice and study of evaluating the proficiency of an individual in using a particular language effectively. This means that test in language is regularly done until the best outcome is gotten.
Pit Corder (1974:351) is of the view that “language tests are measuring instruments and they are applied to learners, not to the teaching materials or teachers. For this reason, they do not tell us ‘directly’ about the contribution of the ‘teacher’ or the ‘materials’ to the learning process. They are designed to measure the learners’ knowledge or competence in the language at a particular moment in his course and nothing else.

The knowledge of one pupil may be compared with the knowledge of others or with that of the same pupil at a different time, or with same standard or norm, as in the case of height, weight, temperature etc.”

Davies (2008) opines that the purpose of a language test is to determine a person’s knowledge or ability in the language and discriminates that person’s ability from that of others. He further says that this kind of test maybe of different kinds like achievement, proficiency or aptitude test. The aim of test according to Davies (2008) is to know the learner’s level of skill over others so that the language teacher will know how to place them.

(Wikipedia the free encyclopedia) views language assessment or language test as a field of study under the umbrella of applied linguistics which its aim/focus is on the assessment of first, second or other languages in the school, college or university context. That is why Igbo language is studied as a second language in all the colleges of education in Nigeria. (National policy on Education)

The Igbo People and the Igbo Language
According to Gordon (2005) the Igbo people are found in the south-eastern and south-western Nigeria. The Igbo speakers found in the south east are in Enugu, Anambra, Imo, Abia, Ebonyi, Rivers and some parts of Cross River State while those in the south west are in Asaba to Agbor in Delta State. Igbo language is one of the four official languages of Nigeria and belongs to the Volta- Niger of the Niger-Congo family of languages (Gordon 2005). The language is studied as a first and second language in Nigerian schools. Since the inception of National policy on Education in (2004) Igbo has become one of the three major languages spoken in Nigeria. Igbo as a tone language has a complicated system of high (/), low (\) and down step (-) tones which indicate differences in words, Phrases and sentences.

Objectives/Purposes of Igbo Language Testing
There are many reasons why an Igbo language teacher should conduct test whether he/she is teaching L1 or an L2 learner. According to Ikedaashi, (1996:40-49) the following are the objectives of language testing:

1. Achievement test. This type of test is used in the Igbo language to know the future of the learner. It is also known as progress test. This kind of test is normally administered on candidates from different institutions who present themselves for a common terminal examination at the end of a certain period of study. The test is based on a known syllabus and the language teacher gives this type of test at the end of the programme of study to know whether the learner has mastered the language expected of him/her. Example of this type of test is WAEC Igbo language examination which shows that the learner has completed his/her secondary school.

2. Diagnostic test. The diagnostic test helps the Igbo language teacher to know the learners errors, sources and possible solutions to the errors, the language teacher uses this type of test to appraise the strength and weakness of the student in the language. Diagnostic test result enables the teacher to know the section of work that needs to be retaught. It can be used for counselling students e.g. the Igbo language teacher after teaching alphabets in Igbo to L2 learners can ask the students to pronounce or write some of the Igbo alphabets like kw, kp, sh, ny,etc from their pronunciations the teacher finds out the learners problems on whether the first language is interfering with the second language.
3. Aptitude/prognostic test. This type of test reveals to the language teacher what the learner or the individual can do in future. This type of test does not rely on the past knowledge e.g. a student who passed very well in JAMB exam in Igbo language can be given aptitude test in the same language to really prove his/her intelligence or mastery of the subject.

4. Placement test. As the name implies, this type of test is used for placement purpose. The teacher uses this type of test to sort new Igbo students into teaching groups so that they get the same knowledge or be at the same level. In Igbo language, the tester can give test on speaking and writing inorder to group them into those that can write or speak because most learners can speak than writing. Finally, there are generally certain things language teachers do that are not acceptable. Test should be seen as teaching device and so a test is a natural step in the educational process. The two fold instructional purpose is to guide both the teacher and the learner. Test is supposed to indicate areas to be retaught and to the learner areas to relearn. A test is therefore, not an end to itself but a means to an effective language teaching, learning in return helps to develop the language.

**Principles Guiding Igbo Language Testing**

1. Anything which can be defined can be tested.
2. Anything which cannot be defined cannot be tested.
3. What is being taught only that is to be tested.
4. One cannot test what one has not taught.
5. Testing should provide information that is credible and very useful.
6. Testing should be impartial and independent in its function.
7. It should always be against some identified standards

**Kinds of Language Test**

1. Retention type of test. This test is given to the learner to know how far he /she has retained the words in his /her memory i.e.: this test expects the learner to remember the words and their meanings in subsequent learning encounters. Example of this type of test in Igbo language can be the teaching of ‘Igbo verbs’ (ngwaa). The teacher tests the students by writing out some verbs and asks them to write out their meanings, if they are able to do it, retention has taken place. The language can move to next stage or level of teaching.

2. Word recognition test. This is the type of test the teacher gives to the learner to know how /find out his ability to recognise and match pictures with words. It may be by arranging letters to form words or words to form sentences. Below is an example of this kind of test:

   Oche    Plate
   Ite     Spoon
   Efere   Chair
   Aziza   Pot
   Ngaji   Broom

   If the learner is able to cross-match the words, the tester’s aim has been achieved and mastery has taken place on the part of the learner.

1. Body movement test. The language teacher gives this type of test through her body movement and is usually inform of verbal test. The aim of this is to test students’ responses to question through command. The tester can beckon on the student to come through waving of the hand or disapproval by shaking the head.
2. Drawing test. This type of test given to the students by the language teacher helps the teacher to know the learners’ ability of knowledge of forms, objects and colours. An example is the drawing of a ‘traditional pot’. The learner should know that a ‘native pot’ is moulded with red clay sand.

3. Recorded speech test. Here the teacher provides the students with recorded speech in Igbo language. After listening to the tape recorder, the teacher can ask them to transcribe what they heard. From their transcriptions the teacher can know their ability to recognise adequate pauses, interjections or any other speech mannerism etc. Sometimes the students are asked to take their own tape recorder to the market and record buying and selling transaction between them and the market sellers. On their return they are asked to interpret the conversation, rewrite or narrate what they heard.

4. Speaking test is another test that the Igbo language teacher uses to discover the ability of the student to be audible using words, fluency, intonation, comportment and appropriate traditional speaking gestures. This can be done during the course of teaching, it can be in form of impromptu speech, dialogue or reading aloud to the hearing of the entire class.

5. Reading test. Most language teachers while teaching do not involve the learners or give reading test to know their ability to read. Learners should be tested with this type of test as it helps the teacher to discover the learner’s ability to comprehend and articulate the passage given. The teacher finds out from the learner’s reading those words or alphabets the learner finds difficult to pronounce so that she can do a kind of reteaching in those areas. Other areas where an Igbo language teacher can test learners are in writing, listening and dictation.

Things to Consider While Administering Test In Igbo Language

1. Learner’s age. Test for a ten year old student should not be given to a twenty year old student. Age determines the type of test to be given.

2. Home background. The language teacher considers the learner’s parents’ status like occupation, level of education, location of the learner’s home whether urban or rural. The learner’s motivation or encouragement at home. All these the tester considers while giving test. Some parents hate other people’s language therefore cannot encourage their children who learn such languages.

3. Language background. This is another factor the language teacher must consider while giving test. This will guide him/her in designing the type of test to administer. If a learner’s language background is English, it may affect the test given in Igbo.

Requirements of a Good Language Test

According to Anasiudu (2001) good language test should have the following requirements:

1. Validity: Language test must be valid in order to test what it is expected to test. In constructing this type of test, it requires a great deal of thought and rigorous analysis. Example of this type of test is multiple choice questions where the learner will show his/her ability to understand the passage by making the distinctions between the choices offered to him. To achieve validity, the tester should follow certain stages, first, has to decide exactly what he/she chooses to test before working out how to test the skill.

2. Reliability: A language test is reliable if it gives the same result anytime it is used on the same individual regardless of who is giving the test or marking it.

3. Discrimination: A good language test must be able to discriminate the various level of attainment. A few may have ‘As’, a few ‘Bs’ a few average and the rest ‘F’. Other requirements of language test are: economy, scorability and administerability.

The Positive effects of language testing on the development of Igbo language

The positive effect of language testing in the development of Igbo language cannot be over emphasised because since the introduction of Nigerian languages in the national curriculum, language testing has taken a formidable role. Odokara (2012) avers that the positive effect of language testing can
only be achieved if the test is handled by competent and experienced teachers. She gives the following as
the positive impacts of language testing on teaching and learning of Igbo:

1. Placement purpose. Language testing guides the teacher to place the learner properly in strings
   where the population of the students are large. The tester does this through aptitude/prognostic test.
   The placement can be also through proficiency test, this helps the teacher to place the learner in
   his/her appropriate class either into elementary or secondary class.
2. Language test encourages team work among learners by sending the learners on field work
   collectively and as the learners do this, it leads to discovering things by themselves.
3. It helps the teacher, educational planners to structure academic syllabus or curriculum in Igbo
   language programmes.
4. It serves as a tool for awarding certificates to the best students in the language class. This is done
   through achievement test.
5. Language testing diagnoses the learner’s areas of strength and weaknesses. Their weaknesses maybe
   as a result of the teacher’s teaching methodology, he/she can do re teach or change to another
   method.
6. It gives feedback to the teacher on the effectiveness of his method and the materials presented to the
   learners while it helps the learner to know how far he/she is progressing in the language.

Negative Effects of Lack of Igbo Language Testing

1. Flexibility. Some language tests are flexible therefore, cannot achieve what is expected of it to
   achieve. ‘Multiple choice’ type of test is an example of language test with flexibility and this does not
   make Igbo language to grow.
2. Some Igbo language teachers after giving test do not mark them. It maybe due to class size or
   laziness. Test is meant to be marked and used for some of the purposes mentioned above.
3. Both the teacher and the learner may not know how far they are progressing in Igbo language unless
   test is conducted.

Summary / Conclusion

Igbo language testing is thus very useful in the preparation of language teaching materials as well
as after the actual teaching has taken place. Tests are used to place the students into categories as well as
to judge the problems of teaching. On the basis of these tests, language teacher focuses his or her attention
wards the areas of difficulties which the learner faces in any language teaching programme and these
areas of difficulties can be predicted by the effective use of language tests. Without effective testing and
evaluation, Igbo language cannot be developed beyond 2020.

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