

## **Language Preference among Workers in Eastern Nigeria: Insights from Selected Ebonyi and Enugu Workplaces**

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### **Abstract**

The superimposition of the English language on Nigeria and other former British colonies remains sustained by both external and internal neocolonial practices. This is evident in the exclusive use of English in workplaces across Igboland and other parts of Nigeria. This study explores language preference among workers in selected workplaces in Ebonyi and Enugu States, Eastern Nigeria. Its objectives include determining language preference between Igbo and English among Igbo workers. The primary data were sourced through questionnaires. A descriptive survey design and mixed methods were employed. Content and thematic analyses, tables, figures, a 5-point Likert scale, percentages, interpretive devices, and critical techniques were also used. The analysis reveals that English is made mandatory in workplaces across Igboland, and that a larger number of older Igbo workers prefer their mother tongue to English but use English because of organisational language policies. Conversely, a few others, especially younger workers, prefer English to Igbo as a means of showing off Western mimicry, literacy, perceived civilisation, and educational attainment. The study concludes that although some Igbo who are accustomed to their mother-tongue prefer to use it at the workplace, others prefer English. It recommends that state governments should statutorily promote the use of Igbo in workplaces. Proficiency in the language of the workplace environment should be one of the criteria for job consideration.

**Keywords: Language preference, Workers, Workplaces, Ebonyi, Enugu**

### **Introduction**

The place of language at the workplace cannot be over-emphasised (Nwode & Anyadiegwu, 2023). Beyond effective use of language at the workplace to achieve different positive results, the particular language used at the workplace also matters. Regrettably, little or no deserving scholarly attention is paid to the use of language at the workplace, based on the dominant or popular language(s) in vogue at a given speech environment. In contemporary Nigeria, the common trend is using the formal or official language of a given speech community, whether appropriate or not. Just as Anyanwu (2023), Nkereuwem and Robert (2023), Robert (2022), Emeka-Nwobia (2015), and Olaoye (2013) rightly observe, most Nigerians believe that given

the attained linguistic prominence of English language, indigenous languages like the Igbo language mean little or nothing. That is why workers in urban speech communities in Enugu and Ebonyi, among other Igbo states, are required to possess the (commanding) knowledge of English language rather than that of the Igbo language at the workplace. Not being literate in English, but Igbo, would mean not being qualified for a job in urban areas in Igboland. For this study, indigenous languages are ordinarily the most preferred languages of communication at the workplace, except where they are not allowed to be used for such purposes

Against the foregoing backdrop, this study sets out to determine the language preferred by Igbo speakers and users of the English language, who make up the largest number of workers across the workplaces in Eastern Nigeria. This is in view of the fact that the Igbo language is their mother-tongue, while English is a foreign language required to be used at workplaces in Nigeria as a whole. By implication, workers, like students, are required to abandon their mother-tongues for English language. This study agrees with Gethin et al. (2021) that in the era of globalisation, economic insecurity and cultural anxiety are major sources of worry among people. Of course, the noted cultural anxiety and economic insecurity surface as most *Ndi Igbo*, most Nigerians, and most peoples of different indigenous languages continually silence, abandon and endanger their mother-tongues (Igbo language, for example) for English language. Thinking about such linguistic dispositions undoubtedly raises serious concerns among Igbo and the like other indigenous peoples. The concerns include cultural anxiety, economic insecurity, linguistic imperialism, language endangerment and attrition, culture erosion, the inhibition of indigenous knowledge, sour intergroup relations, and underdevelopment or retarded development, to mention but a few.

The thinking as well as concerns informed this study. Leaning on the view of Othieno (2014) that indigenous languages (ILs) are the best mechanisms for teaching children, this study argues that indigenous languages are the best mechanisms for attaining great results at the workplace. The present study further observes that a critical look at the situation would make it obvious that if given the choice, most of the workers in Eastern Nigeria would prefer using Igbo language to English language at their places of work. This assertion is negated by the view held by Chukwuma and Agbim (2020) that most Igbo people prefer English to the Igbo language. To prove its central position and the associated assertions or hypothetical thoughts, this study is conceived so as to get to the field and prove its truism or falsity. If the study finds out low use of Igbo at the typical Igbo workplace, it becomes logical to conclude that Igbo workers in Eastern Nigeria mostly prefer English language to Igbo language at their workplaces. If that is what obtains, the implications include the endangerment of the Igbo language at the typical Igbo work environment.

### **Statement of Problem**

The extent to which the English language is used over Nigerian indigenous languages leads to insignificant use of the indigenous languages. The indigenous languages are used with contempt. They are rarely used, largely neglected, and considered less potent. Consequently, Nigerian indigenous languages are endangered and thereby subjected to attrition, which could lead to language death and loss of linguistic identity. The sustained imposition of English on

non-native speakers of English in formal contexts, as in the school setting, also obtains at the workplaces in Igboland. The practice is considered normal by almost everyone, which is why little or no attention is paid research on the choice of language or language preference among Igbo speakers across the workplaces in Igboland.

Although some job adverts spell out “having Igbo knowledge” as an added advantage, workers are mostly not granted the liberty to speak/use Igbo as their choice language at the workplace. Rather, English is compulsory. The situation is such that an Igbo rural migrant to towns in Ebonyi and Enugu, among others, cannot easily be engaged in private work spaces, merely because they are not literate in English. In view of the foregoing linguistic situation, in which the Igbo language, the mother-tongue of majority of the workers, is silenced for the English language, this study sets out to determine the language preference of workers in the typical Igbo speech environment. In doing so, the study seeks to draw evidence from selected workplaces in Ebonyi and Enugu States of Eastern Nigeria.

### **Aim and Objectives**

The study is aimed at determining language preference among workers of selected workplaces in Ebonyi and Enugu States of Eastern Nigeria. Its specific objectives are to:

- (i) Determine the extent to which Igbo speakers of English prefer to use or promote their mother-tongue at the workplace.
- (ii) Compare the influence of Igbo and English languages on workers’ efficiency.
- (iii) Establish the implications of preferring and using English exclusively without Igbo language at the workplaces in Igboland.

### **Research Questions**

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- (i) To what extent do Igbo speakers of English prefer to use or promote their mother-tongue at the workplace?
- (ii) Can the influence of Igbo language on workers’ efficiency equate that of English language?
- (iii) What are the implications of preferring and using English language exclusively without Igbo language at the workplaces in Igboland.

### **Literature Review**

Different studies have been done on English and Igbo languages in many regards. The focus of such studies differs from that of the present study in that such extant studies are preoccupied with the different levels of linguistic analysis of the two languages, and with the use of either of them in settings such as the workplace. In contrast, the present study seeks to determine the workers’ use preference of these two languages, if they were to be granted the choice of using the language they prefer rather than the one imposed on them by their workplace authorities. Thus, it fills the laid-bare study gap on workers’ language preference at the workplace in Igbo towns and cities. Having said the above, it is imperative to present several related recent studies here. The essence is to present their major highlights, which lend credence to the thrust of this

present study. Thus, only some of the closely related literatures have been screened and included herein using inclusion criteria, after excluding others using the exclusion criteria.

Sharing a common viewpoint, Anyanwu (2023), Nwode (2023), Emeka-Nwobia (2015), and Olaoye (2013) demonstrate that indigenous languages have huge capabilities for causing changes and addressing various issues in society, thereby presenting lots of prospects to humans. They see indigenous languages, such as the Igbo language, as viable mechanisms for proffering lasting solutions to most of the issues confronting human society in general and Nigerian society in particular. The scholars regret that policy lapses, bad governance, negative attitude, not teaching children their mother-tongues at schools, elitism, and the sustenance of colonial language pedagogy and curriculum, among others, continuously pose severe challenges to the realisation of the problem-solving potentials of indigenous languages in contemporary Nigeria and the like other nations.

Anyanwu (2023) emphasises that although these languages have problem-solving potentials, just like the English language and the like others, Nigerian government and its agents neglect the potentials and do not harness for meaningful development and lasting solutions. Rather, they look elsewhere for solutions, including seeking solutions from Japan, France, China, South Korea, Norway, Singapore, Britain, the US, and Czech Republic, to mention but a few, where policies largely favour and promote indigenous languages. Therefore, a sporadic shift from the current unfavourable practices of language use in various settings across Nigeria would affect deserving changes and allow for the realisation of the problem-solving potentials of Igbo and other indigenous languages at workplaces and other settings.

Nwode and Anyadiegwu (2023) make a descriptive analysis of how effective use of language can lead to job motivation and employee performance. The analysis is focused on the general use of language at the workplace, stressing that any workplace where language is not used rightly would undoubtedly face some issues of efficiency, performance and productivity that follow job dissatisfaction and boredom. The study relates to the present one in several regards. Yet, it differs in its focus, approach and coverage. Unlike the present study, it is not concerned with determining the language preference of Igbo workers in Enugu and Ebonyi States.

Nkereuwem and Robert (2023) rightly observe that endangering indigenous languages for the alien ones is problematic and harmful to various aspects of the systems of the society. This implies that endangering the Igbo language for the English language poses not just linguistic and cultural problems but also workplace or organisation problems. As such, the use of Igbo language along with the English language across workplaces in Igboland offers the prospect of preventing endangerment. The current language use practice at the workplaces in Igboland does not promote mother-tongue use, promotion and sustenance, thereby upholding hegemonic use of English language at workplaces in Igboland.

On their part, Chukwuma and Agbim (2020) determine the language preference between Igbo and English languages among the contemporary Igbo. They regret that most Igbo people of these days prefer English to Igbo language, their mother-tongue. Therefore, there is need to investigate the language preference of Igbo workers in Igboland so as to determine whether or

not most of them prefer Igbo or English to the other at their workplaces. The investigation is necessary in order to determine whether or not most Igbo workers in Igboland would ordinarily prefer English or Igbo to the other. The present study avers that apart from being compelled by workplace authorities to use English language exclusively, most of the Igbo workers in Igbo speech community prefer speaking the Igbo language to the English language at their workplaces. This assertion obtains practically in cases whereby some workers attend to guests who speak Igbo faster or in better manners and ways than they do to the non-Igbo guests.

Al-Zo'by (2019) considers UN's globalised framework for sustainable development policies on culture as a development strategy. This calls to mind the need to deploy Igbo culture as a strategy for development. Doing so includes using Igbo language much more than English language at the Igbo work environment. However, the non-Igbo should not be discriminated or marginalised on that basis. They should be attended to accordingly and be fondly taught how to speak and use the Igbo language. For example, non-Igbo customers can be playfully taught the names of various items and how say I want this or that in Igbo language. This gesture can attract some of them to such business organisations, as they become poised to going there in order to learn at least a word or an expression each time they go there for goods and services. Continuing with the compulsory use of English language at workplaces in Igbo speech community amounts to the sustenance of Western superimpositions on Africa (Agbo, 2011). Therefore, the little gesture of allowing the use of Igbo language at the workplaces in Igbo can help foster conceptual and linguistic decolonisation, and indigenous language development.

As Besong and Robert (2019) rightly note, "language is instrumental to growth, development, national, interpersonal and inter-group relations, democracy, peace and conflict resolution, every field of study and all human endeavours; the right use of language makes all these, while its wrong use mars them" (p. 1). Their words summarily capture the above views and point to the fact that using Igbo language at the workplace in Igboland has lots of benefits. Their words are affirmation to the views of this study and those of some other extant studies on the potential of indigenous languages to contribute meaningfully to interpersonal relations at the workplace and beyond, resolve and prevent conflicts to certain extent, and foster organisational and national growth and development at an appreciable extent. Again, the quotation underscores the need for using language rightly, indigenous and foreign languages alike. Other measures include meaningful stakeholder collaboration, mass sensitisation, institutional reforms, favourable language use policies, and workplace cultural sensitivity and bilingual and multilingual language use practices are the panacea.

## **Methodology**

Following the nature of the study, descriptive survey design and mixed method were adopted for the study. These enabled the researchers to make empirical survey of the subject matter and combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to the scholastic investigation. The study relied on primary and secondary data sources concurrently. To obtain primary data, structured and unstructured questionnaire copies were administered to four hundred (440) respondents across 4 major metropolitan areas of Ebonyi and Enugu States. That is, in each of the two states, 220 respondents each are involved, totalling to the 440. Mixed categories of workers were

involved. Although there was an equal distribution of 110 copies among the respondents in the selected areas, only 400 copies were duly filled and returned. Thus, 400 were used for the data presentation and analysis, with the results being based on the 400 responses.

Different workplaces in Abakaliki and Ohaozara Metropolis in Ebonyi State, and Abakpa-Nike and Uwani Metropolis in Enugu are selected randomly. The selected areas are considered to be the microcosmic representatives of the two states as well as the five Eastern states of Nigeria. The states are Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. The respondents were guided by the research assistants, after the brief given by the researchers. Being structured and unstructured, the participants are offered the open-ended questionnaire to allow for their personal initiatives or opinions outside the structured questions. Only the duly filled and returned questionnaire copies, which are without alteration or double answers, are considered for analysis.

The data analysis is done both qualitatively and quantitatively, employing percentage, figures, Likert 5-scale coding, interpretive devices, and critical and language-based techniques. Based on the mixed method, the techniques are mainly statistical and descriptive. Theme-based systematic review is used for the analysis of the secondary data, sourced from Google Scholar, Academia.edu, ResearchGate, and several other major repositories on the internet. Some of the secondary data are sourced from conventional or analogue libraries. Thematic systematic review focuses on synthesising and analysing the thematic concerns based on the central content elements. In the analysis of both sets of data, thematic and content analyses are done. In presenting the data in tabulated form, the abbreviations of the response variables Strongly (SA), Agreed (A), Neutral (N), Strongly Disagreed (SD), Disagreed (D), AND Disagreed (D) will be used.

### Presentation and Analysis of Data

**Table 1: High extent of preference among Igbo speakers of English at the workplace**

SN	Variables	SA	A	N	SD	D	Tot.
	<i>The extent to which Igbo speakers of English prefer to use or promote their mother-tongue at the workplace is high.</i>						
	No. of responses	219	99	31	-	51	400
		54.75	24.75	7.75		12.75	100

**Source: Authors, 2023**

Given the data presented in Table 1, the study has established the extent to which Igbo speakers of English prefer to use or promote their mother-tongue at the workplace to be high. The proof is obtained from 318 (79.5%), with 219 (54.75%) for SA and 99 (24.75%) for A. On the other hand, only 51 (12.75%) disagreed. The other 31 (7.75%) were neutral to SA, A, SD and D.

The implication of this finding is that most of the respondents have high preference for their mother-tongue at the workplace, but rather get compelled by their organisational ethics on

language use. Their language preference is not considered, as they are barred from using Igbo or any other indigenous languages, but the English language alone.

**Table 2: Low extent of preference among Igbo speakers of English at the workplace**

SN	Variables	SA	A	N	SD	D	Tot.
	<i>The extent to which Igbo speakers of English prefer to use or promote their mother-tongue at the workplace is low.</i>						
	No. of responses	-	51	30	319	-	400
		-	12.75	7.5	79.75	-	100

**Source: Authors, 2023**

Clearly, the extent to which Igbo speakers of English prefer to use or promote their mother-tongue at the workplace is proven to be high rather than low. As 319 (79.75%) strongly disagreed to the hypothesised low extent, the finding is upheld to be that the extent is high. This is because of its statistical prominence of being the highest ratio. Only 51 (12.75%) agreed to the proposition, while only 30 (7.5%) chose the Neutral response option.

It should be noted that the current use of Igbo language at the workplaces in Igboland is low, but the workers' preference for Igbo language is high. That is, if ordinarily left to choose between or allowed to use Igbo and English languages concurrently, a larger number of Igbo workers would prefer to use the Igbo language much more than they use the English language. Based on observation at the field, most of such Igbo workers are the older ones. Many of the younger ones seemed comfortable with the imposition of the English language on them at their workplaces. The older Igbo have the unfinished task of rousing same linguistic consciousness in the younger ones at home, so as for them to begin to value their mother-tongue as such.

**Table 3: Comparing the influence of Igbo on workers' efficiency can equate that of English language**

SN	Variables	SA	A	N	SD	D	Tot.
	<i>The influence of Igbo language on workers' efficiency can equate that of English language.</i>						
	No. of responses	111	197	39	13	40	400
		27.75	49.25	9.75	3.25	10	100

**Source: Authors, 2023**

In comparing the influence of Igbo language on workers' efficiency with that of English language on their efficiency, it is established that the two languages are effective, influential and functionally relevant to businesses. They are neither superior nor inferior to each other. They play equal critical linguistic role in socio-economic contexts. Accordingly, the proof is obtained from 111 (27.75%) for Strongly Agreed and 197 (49.25%) for Agreed. On the

contrary, 39 (9.75%) indicated 'Neutral', while 13 (3.25%) strongly disagreed and 40 (10%) disagreed to the proposition.

It is quite evident from the 5 sets of data that Igbo language, like the English language, has the functional capacity to influence the efficiency of the workers in the case study areas and workplaces as well as elsewhere. Given this finding, organisations in Igboland should realise that the use of Igbo by workers does no harm, but good, to their businesses. For example, customers, who are less literate in English or do not like speaking English language often, are bound to patronise organisations where they are attended to using Igbo language much more than those where English language is the order of the day.

**Table 4: Implications of preferring and using English language exclusively without Igbo**

SN	Variables	SA	A	N	SD	D	Tot.
	<i>There are grave implications of preferring and using English language exclusively without Igbo at the workplaces in Igboland, which are:</i>						
	Heightened English language hegemony, linguistic imperialism, and cultural erosion Loss of interest in Igbo language and culture Psychological implications manifest in forms of shame and tension over inability to speak English fluently Communication anxiety among workers having little or no proficiency in Igbo language Parents get pressured to raise their children in English language alone so as to enable their children fit for the English-dominated work environment Creation of social and linguistic gaps among workers and between workers and customers Increased social fragmentation Weakened workplace cohesion, with adverse effects on diversity and cultural competence Posing threats of endangerment and attrition to the Igbo language	101	291	8	-	-	400 100

**Source: Authors, 2023**

Out of the 400 (100%) responses, 392 (98%) confirmed that there are grave implications of preferring and using English language exclusively without Igbo at the workplaces in Igboland.

The identified implications are affirmed by the 392 respondents. Although none of the respondents disagreed to the proposition, 8 (2%) of them indicated ‘Neutral’. Considering the grave implications, workers should be allowed to use their preferred language, particularly their mother-tongue, along with English or any other language of transaction and communication a given speech community. As regards the case study, Igbo workers should be allowed to use Igbo or English, depending on their preference. However, they should be able to switch between the two languages, so as to effectively transact and communicate with both Igbo and non-Igbo customers.

**Table 5: How to address the matters arising from preferring and using English language exclusively without Igbo at the workplaces in Igboland**

SN	Variables	SA	A	N	SD	D	Tot.
	<i>The matters arising from preferring and using English language exclusively without Igbo language at the workplaces in Igboland can be addressed viz:</i>						
	Allowing workers to use Igbo for fellow Igbo workers and customers	162	183	15	-	40	
	Practising micro teaching of non-Igbo customers and guests, as a way of engaging them learning Igbo vocabularies						
	Promoting Igbo language and culture at the workplace						
	Sensitising employers and employees that the language of the immediate environment is an asset rather than a barrier, and the socio-economic and identity benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism						
	Policy support from state government, whereby it becomes compulsory to use English and Nigerian indigenous languages concurrently at workplaces, and make Igbo language compulsory across primary and secondary schools						
	Leveraging AI and other cutting-edge technologies for developing, engineering, digitalising, enriching, and promoting Igbo language						
	Workplace Igbo language training						
	Pairing fluent Igbo speakers with learners						

**Source: Authors, 2023**

Data in the Table 5 confirm that the matters arising from preferring and using English language exclusively without Igbo at the workplaces in Igboland can be addressed through the identified

ways. The confirmation is gotten from 345 (86.25%) respondents, who agreed strongly and agreed respectively. While 162 (40.5%) strongly agreed, 183 (45.75%) agreed that the identified factors are viable means of addressing the matters arising from preferring and using English language exclusively without Igbo at the workplaces in Igboland. In contrast, 40 (10%) respondents disagreed, while the remaining 15 (3.75%) were indifferent, as they chose the 'Neutral' response option.

## Conclusion

Considering the importance of indigenous languages and the imperative of using one's mother tongue in various settings, this study focuses on determining language preference between Igbo and English among Igbo workers in Ebonyi and Enugu States. The findings show that, if not for organizational restrictions on language use in the workplace, a larger number of adult Igbo speakers of English would prefer using Igbo rather than English at work. The study further reveals that most Igbo speakers of English naturally prefer Igbo to English in workplace interactions. Only a few young Igbo workers prefer Igbo to English. Although the preference for Igbo is high, the actual use of English is higher.

Organizational policies are the primary reason for the preference for and use of English over Igbo across workplaces in Igboland. While many older Igbo workers are uncomfortable with the practice of English exclusivity in workplaces, most of the younger ones do not perceive it as a problem. This generational gap underscores the need for older Igbo speakers to rekindle the interest of younger people in the Igbo language and culture. The study also shows that both Igbo and English influence workers' efficiency equally. Neither language is superior or inferior to the other; they perform similarly important functions in business, contributing to operational success, socio-economic advancement, and broader developmental outcomes.

However, the exclusive use of English in workplaces across Igboland has significant implications, which are socio-economic, psychological, commercial, cultural, policy-related, and professional. The study identifies several practical solutions to address issues arising from the exclusive use of English without Igbo in workplaces. These include meaningful stakeholder collaboration, mass sensitisation, institutional reforms, favourable language-use policies, and workplace cultural sensitivity, as well as the adoption of bilingual and multilingual practices.

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