The Role of Indigenous Language Proficiency in Enhancing Entrepreneurial Apprenticeship: An Empirical Evidence from Enugu State, South-Eastern Nigeria

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Abstract

The Igbo Apprenticeship System (IAS), referred to as "Ịgba Bọyị," symbolises a historically robust framework for entrepreneurial growth in South-Eastern Nigeria. By utilising mentorship, seasoned entrepreneurs educate apprentices in both skills and cultural values, leading to backing for independent businesses, which notably decreases unemployment and promotes small to medium enterprises. Although its economic contributions are acknowledged, the importance of Igbo language proficiency in promoting knowledge transfer is still not sufficiently investigated. This research quantitatively examines how proficiency in the Igbo language affects the effectiveness of entrepreneurial apprenticeships. Utilising a cross-sectional survey approach, information was gathered from 181 past apprentices in markets throughout Enugu State (such as Ogbete and Kenyatta) through a multilingual questionnaire (English, Pidgin, and Igbo). Factors encompassed language skills, transfer of knowledge, and entrepreneurial results. Findings indicated that 89.5% of participants viewed the Igbo language as enhancing business education

(χ^2 = 22.195, df = 4, p < .001), while 82.3% linked it to ongoing entrepreneurial achievement (χ^2 = 67.626, df = 12, p < .001). These results highlight the practical importance of the Igbo language beyond its cultural value, filling a void in earlier qualitative studies and aligning with sociocultural theories that regard language as a cognitive instrument. This research enhances the discussion by empirically affirming indigenous language skills as a factor in entrepreneurial success within informal systems. It suggests that policymakers and educators incorporate Igbo language into vocational programs to improve IAS effectiveness, safeguarding its sustainability against current economic challenges and strengthening its significance in Nigeria's informal sector.

Key Words: Igbo Language, Indigenous Language, Language Proficiency, Entrepreneurial, Apprenticeship

1. Introduction

The Igbo apprenticeship system (IAS), also known as "Ịgba Bọyị," has been an organised way for entrepreneurs to learn from each other for a long time in southeastern Nigeria. It helps businesses grow and people get rich. This method depends on an experienced business owner, or "master," teaching a young person trade skills, cultural values, and information about the industry. The "master" then gives the young person the tools or money they need to start their own business (Odjo, 2021). Scholars agree that the IAS is an important way to help small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) grow and reduce unemployment (Onwuatuegwu & Nwagu, 2023). Its long history, from before colonisation to now, shows how important it is, but some practical parts are still not fully understood. One aspect that is often ignored is the part that being able to speak the native language can play in making interactions in the IAS more efficient. As Chen (2024) asserts, knowing how to speak and write Igbo is important for teaching, passing on traditional values, and explaining business principles. All of these things help people adopt creative practices. Language is a way to communicate and keep culture alive. It helps people understand morals and techniques that are important for the training process (Nwankwere, 2019). Although research shows that language skills make it easier to use culturally sensitive models like the IAS (Link et al., 2021), there are still not many studies that look at how they directly affect business outcomes. The research on vocational education emphasises the role of

language in skill learning, interpersonal communication, and cognitive development, all of which are required for entrepreneurship (Mungongi, 2018). Research shows that teaching in indigenous languages helps students remember what they've learnt and get involved in activities that are important to them (Fong et al., 2023). The IAS relies on direct guidance to do this.

Despite the acknowledged benefits to company growth, actual research on the correlation between Igbo language competence and entrepreneurial achievement is limited. While qualitative studies highlight the cultural relevance of the language in apprenticeship training (Nnonyelu, 2020; Chukwuma-Nwuba et al., 2023), some researchers contend that vocational research sometimes gives technical skills top priority above linguistic and cultural elements (Esmond, 2021). Despite substantial debates on the economic and social implications of IAS (Kanu, 2020; Iwara et al., 2019), language analysis is absent from extant studies. This study fills in this need by looking at how knowledge transfer in the IAS is affected by Igbo language competency and how this affects entrepreneurial results. The findings will assist lawmakers, educators, and entrepreneurs in making improved choices. They will emphasize the significance of vocational programs that are culturally inclusive and methods for language preservation to enhance the effectiveness of apprenticeships (Umemezia & Ojukwu, 2023). This research highlights the significance of the IAS in contemporary economic discussions and challenges the neglect of language in vocational education systems

To structure this inquiry, the study proposed three hypotheses:

- **H1:** There is no significant relationship between Igbo language proficiency and perceived business success.
- **H2:** There is an association between Igbo language proficiency and perceived success in business.
- **H3:** The frequency of Igbo language use by masters during apprenticeship predicts whether speaking Igbo is perceived to accelerate business learning.

These hypotheses expand on the academic groundwork established by Kanu (2020) and Iwara et al. (2019) by framing a critical investigation that connects empirical analysis with the cultural underpinnings of the IAS.

2. Literature Review

Theoretical Framework: Cultural Materialism Theory and Sociocultural Theory of Language

Introduced by Harris (1979), cultural materialism holds that economic, technical, and environmental factors impact cultural activities. This theory offers a good basis for comprehending the Igbo apprenticeship system, which responds to socioeconomic issues by functioning as both an entrepreneurial framework and a survival tool (Dore, 2025). The system's dependence on mentoring and income redistribution reflects materialist ideas, in which knowledge transfer is motivated by economic need rather than official schooling (Okeke, 2023). But cultural materialism falls short in addressing the cognitive and linguistic processes that enable information sharing, therefore underscoring a knowledge gap. In contrast, Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory of Language stresses the importance of language in learning and brain growth. According to Morselli and Kakouris (2022), language in apprenticeship settings is important for more than just conversation; it is also a key part of learning how to be a business. Through organised interactions, apprentices learn the job skills, business tactics, and negotiation skills they need to start their own businesses (Beckers, 2023). The Igbo apprenticeship paradigm is better understood when these ideas are combined. While sociocultural theory emphasises how language and cognitive processes impact entrepreneurial learning, cultural materialism emphasises financial reasons (Guile & Young, 2014). This combined approach fills in a major research void on the function of indigenous language in the learning of business knowledge. Understanding how apprentices absorb and implement business concepts via language and cultural immersion is even more crucial as globalisation changes economic dynamics (Man, Berger & Rachamim, 2024).

The Igbo Apprenticeship System

Among the most well-known indigenous economic systems in Africa is the Igbo apprenticeship system, sometimes known as Ịgba Bọyị. It helps the Igbo community in southeastern Nigeria redistribute wealth, learn new skills, and grow their businesses by using an entrepreneurship training plan (Eze, 2023; Onu et al., 202333). According to Osuagwu (2024) and Umemezia and Ojukwu (2023), this system has long been an important factor in promoting economic sustainability since it allows apprentices to learn from more seasoned business owners in a

structured environment before being given the means to start their own businesses. Unlike Western vocational training models that depend on formal education and certification, the Igbo apprenticeship system remains informal, giving direct mentoring, experiential learning, and knowledge transfer via observation and active participation top priority (Irene et al., 2024; Oko-Joseph, 2024). This approach conforms to social learning theory, which holds that people learn best by imitation and practice under professional direction (Osuagwu, 2024). According to research, it has a positive effect on the economy, lowering unemployment and bolstering the informal sector—a key economic driver in Nigeria (Afunugo & Molokwu, 2024). Notwithstanding its effectiveness, the system now faces contemporary issues, including the lack of legal protection for apprentices, the absence of standardised agreements, and the waning desire of established businesses to teach new apprentices (Chukwu et al., 2024). Furthermore, changing economic interests due to globalisation and the emergence of digital companies have diminished the appeal of conventional trade-based apprenticeships among younger generations (Eze, 2023; Nnonyelu et al., 2023).

Language and Knowledge Transfer

In informal learning situations like apprenticeships (Bala & Nyaga, 2024; Alla-Mensah & McGrath, 2023), language is very important for passing on information. Research on vocational education shows that teaching in local languages helps students understand, remember, and learn new skills (Alarcó, 2023; Angelo et al., 2022). Ohazuruike & Elechi (2023) and Umemezia & Ojukwu (2023) say that using Igbo as the main language of teaching in the Igbo apprenticeship system makes it easier to pass on knowledge and helps apprentices understand complicated business strategies better. According to linguistic relativity theory, language changes cognitive processes by impacting decision-making and problem-solving abilities (Scheidegger, 2024; Crisfield, 2022). Given the prevalence of cultural idioms and context-specific expressions in business contacts, being fluent in one's native language improves one's critical thinking and negotiating skills in commercial situations (Kanu, 2022; Ejjebli, 2023). Abba, Ani, and Ndubuisi (2023) claim that the Igbo language, which is full of vocabulary and concepts connected to trade and business, teaches apprentices important management and customer service skills.

Entrepreneurship and Language Proficiency

Studies have found a strong connection between being able to speak more than one language and being successful as a business (Ejiofor & Otika, 2024; Eze, 2024). Osuagwu (2024) suggests that entrepreneurs who speak their own language well are better at negotiating, getting along with customers, and adapting to changes in the market. Akinola (2023) and Adeola (2024) found that knowing cultural language knowledge like igbo well helps in building trust, improving interpersonal relationships, and passing on indigenous business knowledge effectively in Igbo business environments. Language skills can also help with business: entrepreneurs who can speak and write in both local and international languages can reach more customers and do better in a variety of economic situations (Elo, Kothari & Ivanova-Gongne, 2022; Shehu, Tafida & Chike-Okoli, 2024.024). International trade studies show that business owners who speak more than one language can get better deals, make friends with people from other cultures, and reach more customers (Isiani et al., 2024; Hosen, 2023).

Gaps in Research

Many studies have been done on the Igbo apprenticeship system, but there are still some gaps. Studies have looked at the economic and social benefits, mentorship systems, and business results of apprenticeships, but not many have looked at how language skills affect apprenticeship success (Abba & Ugochukwu, 2023; Osuagwu, 2024). Literature mostly talks about money and building things, but it often forgets to talk about how language skills affect remembering business information, negotiating, and making smart choices (Rance, 2024; Eze, 2023). A quantitative study (Isiani et al., 2024) has found a clear link between being able to speak Igbo and being successful as an entrepreneur after an apprenticeship. A lot of qualitative research talks about how important language is to culture, but not many empirical studies look at how it affects business success (Osuagwu, 2024; AlMehrzi, Tipu & Sarker, 2024). Irene et al. (2024) and Onoshakpor and Ndeh (2024) both explore how knowledge sharing may assist individuals who speak more than one language to do better in business.

3. Methodology

This study used a cross-sectional quantitative survey method to look at the link between being able to speak Igbo well and being successful as an entrepreneur among former apprentices. This method made it easy to collect data at one point in time, which made it quick and easy to look into how language skills affect business performance (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Bryman, 2021). The organised data collection was a good way to look into the role of language in informal learning settings like the Igbo apprenticeship system.

Study Population and Sampling

This study focused on apprentices in Enugu State, a region in southeastern Nigeria recognized for its robust Igbo apprenticeship customs (Eze, 2023), targeting participants aged 15 to 50. Chosen from a group of 181 participants based on previous research on the Igbo apprenticeship model (Helen, et al., 2024). Key trading locations such as Ogbete Market, Kenyatta Market, Timber Market (Abakpa), Artisans Market, Gariki Market, Coal Camp (Enugu), Computer Village (Nsukka), Nsukka New Market, and Mechanic Village (Nsukka) were offered to participants. The sampling techniques employed were purposeful and snowball (Saunders, et al., 2019). Purposive sampling ensured that only individuals who had completed their apprenticeships were included, guaranteeing that they possessed valuable experience. By utilizing market associations and trade unions, which allowed original respondents to recruit additional participants, snowball sampling expanded the pool of individuals who could be surveyed.

Data Collection Instrument

A structured questionnaire was made to find out how business success among Igbo Apprenticeship System (IAS) graduates is related to their ability to speak and write Igbo. To ensure accessibility, the questionnaire was prepared in English, Pidgin, and Igbo (Velez, et al., 2024). It addressed demographics (e.g., age and education), language proficiency, Igbo language's use in business, and entrepreneurial success, incorporating closed-ended questions, Likert-scale items (rating agreement from 1 to 5), and categorical responses (Omoede & Daniel, 2023). Content validity was confirmed through review by language and business experts from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (Obi, 2022). Reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, demonstrating strong internal consistency across key sections:

- Igbo Language Proficiency: α = .945
- Business and Igbo Language: α = .912
- Business Success: α = .879 (Field, 2018). These high values indicate that the questions reliably measured the intended concepts.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection occurred online via WhatsApp groups and Facebook communities where former apprentices discussed business matters. These platforms were selected due to their active use by small business owners. Snowball sampling enhanced participation, as initial respondents shared the survey within their networks, increasing coverage across the targeted markets (Saunders, et al., 2019).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS software (Pallant, 2020). Descriptive statistics summarized participant characteristics, such as age, years of apprenticeship, trade specialization, and education level. Chi-square tests examined relationships between language proficiency, knowledge transfer, and business success (Field, 2018). Correlation analysis assessed the strength and direction of these associations. Together, these statistical methods provided evidence-based insights into the influence of Igbo language proficiency on entrepreneurship, addressing gaps in prior research.

4. Results

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 summarizes the demographic profile of the 181 respondents, including age, gender, education level, apprenticeship duration, and trade specialization.

Table 1. Social Demography of Respondents

Demographic Category	**Sub-Category**	**Number of Respondents**	**Percentage (%)**
Age	Under 18	5	2.8%
	18–24 years	10	5.5%
	25–34 years	38	21.0%
	35–44 years	43	23.8%
	45–54 years	54	29.8%
	55 years and above	31	17.1%

Gender	Male	80	45.5%
	Female	85	48.3%
	Other	11	6.2%
Education Level	No formal education	7	3.9%
	Primary education	24	13.3%
	Secondary education	99	54.7%
	Tertiary education	51	28.2%
Years of Apprenticeship	Less than 1 year	3	1.7%
	1–2 years	53	29.3%
	3–4 years	65	35.9%
	5–6 years	44	24.3%
	More than 6 years	16	8.8%
Trade Specialization	Automobile Repair	15	8.3%
	Catering and Food Services	28	15.5%
	Fashion and Tailoring	22	12.2%
	Sales	31	17.1%
	Hairdressing and Beauty Services	17	9.4%
	Others (e.g., Carpentry, Electrical, etc.)	68	37.6%

Igbo Language Proficiency and Use in Business

A majority of respondents rated their Igbo proficiency as "good" (49.7%) or "excellent" (34.3%), indicating a strong command of the language. Table 2 presents self-assessed fluency levels.

Table 2. Igbo Language Proficiency

Fluency Level	**Number of Respondents**	**Percentage (%)**
Very poor	6	3.3%
Poor	7	3.9%
Moderate	16	8.8%
Good	90	49.7%
Excellent	62	34.3%

Table 3 shows that 76.8% of respondents "often" or "always" spoke Igbo in business, reinforcing its role in professional interactions.

Table 3. Frequency of Igbo Use in Business

Frequency of Use	**Number of Respondents**	**Percentage (%)**
Never	3	1.7%
Rarely	13	7.2%
Sometimes	20	11.0%
Often	70	38.7%
Always	69	38.1%

Impact of Igbo Language on Apprenticeship Learning

A significant majority (89.5%) agreed that speaking Igbo language accelerated business learning. Table 4 summarizes the impact of Igbo language use on apprenticeship learning.

Table 4. Impact on Apprenticeship Learning

Questionnaire Item	**Response Options**	**Number of Respondents**	**Percentage (%)**
Master's Language Use: Did your master use Igbo when teaching you?	Never	12	6.6%
	Rarely	12	6.6%
	Sometimes	21	11.6%
	Often	58	32.0%
	Always	78	43.1%
Did speaking Igbo help you learn business faster?	Yes	162	89.5%
	No	19	10.5%

A Pearson Chi-Square test ($\chi^2 = 22.195$, df = 4, $p < .001$) confirmed a significant relationship between Igbo use in apprenticeship and faster business learning (Table 5).

Table 5. Chi-Square Test on Igbo Use and Learning Efficiency

Test	**Value**	**df**	**Significance (p-value)**
Pearson Chi-Square	22.195	4	.000
Likelihood Ratio	19.057	4	.001
Valid Cases	181	-	-

Impact of Igbo Language on Entrepreneurial Success

Table 6 highlights that 82.3% of respondents agreed (47.5%) or strongly agreed (34.8%) that speaking Igbo positively influenced business success.

Table 6. Impact on Entrepreneurial Success

Questionnaire Item	**Response Options**	**Number of Respondents**	**Percentage (%)**
Perceived Success Impact: Did Igbo language help you succeed in business?	Strongly disagree	1	0.6%
	Disagree	10	5.5%
	Neutral	21	11.6%
	Agree	86	47.5%
	Strongly agree	63	34.8%

A Chi-Square test ($\chi^2 = 67.626$, df = 12, $p < .001$) in Table 7 confirms a significant association between Igbo proficiency and business longevity.

Table 7. Chi-Square Test on Igbo Proficiency and Business Longevity

Test	**Value**	**df**	**Significance (p-value)**
Pearson Chi-Square	67.626	12	.000
Likelihood Ratio	52.093	12	.000
Valid Cases	181	-	-

Predicting Business Learning through Igbo Use

Chi-Square test ($\chi^2 = 22.195$, df = 4, $p < .001$) in Table 8 confirms that frequent Igbo use during apprenticeship significantly predicts business learning effectiveness.

Table 8. Chi-Square Test on Master's Igbo Use and Learning Perception

Test	**Value**	**df**	**Significance (p-value)**
Pearson Chi-Square	22.195	4	.000
Likelihood Ratio	19.057	4	.001
Valid Cases	181	-	-

5. Discussion

This study's results show that Igbo language proficiency greatly improves how apprentices learn business skills and succeed in the Igbo Apprenticeship System (IAS). Of the 181 respondents, 89.5% said Igbo language helped them learn faster ($\chi^2 = 22.195$, $p < .001$), and 82.3% linked it to business success ($\chi^2 = 67.626$, $p < .001$). These findings match Vygotsky's (1978) idea that language builds understanding and skills, as seen when most apprentices whose masters used Igbo often felt better prepared for business. This agrees with Bala and Nyaga (2024), who found local languages boost vocational training, but this study goes further by showing that Igbo language also sharpens negotiation and problem-solving skills in an informal setting.

The results also highlight Igbo language's role in keeping cultural values and business networks alive, with over 82% saying it helped their success. This fits with Eze (2023) and Osuagwu (2024), who see the IAS as a way to share wealth and skills, though they don't focus on language like this study does. Okeke (2023) notes the system's roots in community traditions, and here, Igbo carries those ethics, helping apprentices spot opportunities and handle risks. This matches Elo, et al. (2022), who say language skills aid business adaptability. Yet, modern pressures for quick profits, noted by Nnonyelu (2020), challenge this slow, language-rich approach, suggesting a need to protect Igbo language's use in training.

Compared to other studies, this work aligns with Wei, et al. (2018), who found dialect fluency helps Chinese migrants start businesses by building trust and easing barriers, much like Igbo does here. But while they studied newcomers adapting, this study shows Igbo apprentices using their native tongue to strengthen an existing system. Campo, et al. (2017) suggest languages without future markers encourage entrepreneurship by making rewards feel closer, and though Igbo's structure differs, its use in IAS supports long-term planning, aligning with their idea in a unique way. Cheteni and Umejesi (2024) tie indigenous knowledge to rural business success, and this study builds on that, proving Igbo language passes down that knowledge, boosting performance. Unlike formal education studies, this work shows language's power in informal learning, adding a fresh angle to the field.

6. Implications for Practice

This study's findings suggest practical steps for strengthening the IAS. Policymakers should promote Igbo language training in apprenticeship programs to boost learning and business success, as 89.5% of respondents linked it to faster skill mastery and 82.3% to sustained outcomes. Educators can develop culturally focused curricula that use Igbo language to teach business skills, preserving traditions while preparing apprentices for modern markets in South-Eastern Nigeria. To improve comprehension and establish trust-based networks, business leaders and mentors should make speaking Igbo a priority throughout training. These steps can help keep the IAS's value, which will help it do well even when the economy changes and support Nigeria's private sector.

7. Strengths and Limitations of the Study

One concern with this study is that it relies on self-reported data from WhatsApp and Facebook. This is because people's subjective opinions may overstate how much Igbo affects business success. Objective measures, like financial performance indicators, could be used in future study to look into this. There is a chance of selection bias with snowball sampling because it favours networks that are linked and limits how broadly the results can be used. On the other hand, the study's strengths are its strict quantitative approach, which fills in empirical gaps in previous qualitative studies, and its diverse sample of 181 respondents, which shows high internal consistency (± >.879). Also, the snowballing method assisted in ensuring that true respondents are used. These qualities make it more valuable to scholars and show that Igbo ability is more than just culturally relevant to IAS success.

8. Conclusion

This study investigated how Igbo language competency influences knowledge transfer and entrepreneurial success in the IAS of South-Eastern Nigeria. The results make it clear how important it is: 89.5% of 181 people who answered said learning Igbo language helped them learn business skills faster (χ^2 = 22.195, p <.001), and 82.3% said it led to long-term business success (χ^2 = 67.626, p <.001). The previous studies that did not include the effect of language (Kanu, 2020; Iwara, et al., 2019) tended to concentrate on cultural or economic factors. They show that the Igbo language is not just a part of culture, but also a useful way to teach others

skills and build great businesses. The study backs with Vygotsky's (1978) claim that language promotes learning by conveying Igbo customs and commercial knowledge (Eze, 2023; Osuagwu, 2024). However, modern pressures such as the need for quick profits threaten this system (Nnonyelu, 2020), emphasising the importance of protecting the use of the Igbo language. This study uses strong numbers and a wide range of samples to help us learn more about how local systems like the IAS can still work well today. It has lessons for Nigeria's economy and other economies as well.

9. Recommendations

Based on these results, the IAS and its use of Igbo language can be made stronger in a number of ways. As most respondents (89.5%) said, learning Igbo language helped them learn faster and 82.3% said it was important for success, policymakers in the region should make it a requirement for apprenticeship programs to teach the language. This has the potential to strengthen the system in Nigeria's informal sector. Umemezia and Ojukwu (2023) believe that educators should make lesson plans that use the Igbo language to teach business skills, combining traditional roots with current needs. The study shows that using a language often helps people understand and believe it, so IAS mentors should make it a point to use Igbo language a lot during training. Researchers should examine these concepts further, employing measurements such as profitability or sales to validate this study's self-reported findings and correct a stated flaw. To combat the trend towards short-term gains like cybercrime, community leaders can also teach young people to value the IAS and Igbo languages (Nnonyelu, 2020). All of these steps can help make sure that the IAS stays an important tool for economic growth.

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