

Language and Cultural Education in Sustaining Igbo Cultural Renaissance in Federal Universities in South-East Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined how language and cultural education contribute to sustaining Igbo cultural renaissance in federal universities in South-East Nigeria. The study was motivated by increasing economic pressures on youths, which often prioritize survival over cultural identity and threaten the continuity of indigenous knowledge systems. Specifically, the study sought to: (i) determine how language and cultural education influence Igbo youths' engagement in cultural renaissance activities, and (ii) identify educational strategies that can sustain Igbo cultural knowledge among economically challenged youths. A descriptive survey research design was adopted. The population comprised all Igbo language lecturers in federal universities in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria, from which a sample of 60 lecturers was selected using proportionate stratified random sampling technique. Data were collected using a 20-item questionnaire with a reliability coefficient of 0.93 determined through Cronbach Alpha method. Mean scores and standard deviation were used for data analysis. Findings revealed that language and cultural education significantly enhance cultural awareness, identity formation and participation in cultural practices, self-esteem and advocacy for Igbo heritage despite economic constraints. The study further found that curriculum integration, culturally responsive pedagogy, community-based learning, digital platforms, and linking culture to entrepreneurship are effective strategies for sustaining Igbo cultural knowledge in university settings. The study concluded that language and cultural education are vital tools for reinforcing cultural resilience and youth engagement. It was recommended that Igbo language and cultural education be integrated into formal curricula as an approach that responds to economic realities while preserving Igbo cultural identity.

Keywords: Language education, cultural education, cultural renaissance, Igbo youths, economic challenges

Introduction

In the tapestry of human societies, language and culture which are inseparable are more than communicative tools; they are the foundational pillars of human identity and the living reservoirs of collective memory, values, social continuity, and worldviews. For the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, language is the medium through which folklore, proverbs, rituals, oral tradition, and indigenous knowledge are transmitted, shaping how individuals see themselves and their community (UNESCO, 2025). Okafor (2025) notes that language is not merely a tool for communication; it is the bedrock of cultural identity and heritage transmission. Chukwuma (2025) contends that indigenous languages encapsulate worldviews, traditions, norms, and cognitive frameworks that sustain communities across generations. In the same vein, culture embodies ancestral wisdom, social norms, oral histories, and cosmological understandings that have been nurtured over centuries. Cultures, in turn, are sustained when these linguistic

traditions are actively learnt, practised, and celebrated (Chiblow, and Meighan, (2021). Yet, when languages recede, the cultural meanings they carry risk fading into silence.

Culture refers to the integrated pattern of behaviours, beliefs, values, symbols, and norms that distinguish one group from another (Ogbonna, 2025). Language and culture are inseparable: language carries cultural nuances that cannot be fully rendered in foreign tongues without loss of meaning, context, and emotion (Eze, 2025). Cultural education refers to systematic instruction designed to transmit and reinforce the values, beliefs, norms, practices, art forms, and social behaviours that define a group or community. Cultural education promotes cultural awareness, appreciation, and continuity (Nwafor, 2025). Dimensions of Cultural Education includes:

Experiential learning: using festivals, storytelling, rituals, and community engagement

Symbolic learning: teaching art, music, folklore, tradition, and customs

Reflective learning: exploring cultural identity, values, and ethics

In the context of this research, cultural education comprises instructional approaches, curricular content, and learning environments that consciously include Igbo cultural knowledge, its practices, history, worldview, and value systems within university education. Ogbonna (2025) found that when cultural elements were incorporated into classroom instruction and school programs, learners developed stronger cultural identities, increased participation in cultural activities, and enhanced social cohesion. Obiegbu (2016) demonstrated that cultural education in Nigerian secondary schools strengthened students' moral reasoning, respect for tradition, and intergenerational linkages, suggesting similar potential in tertiary institutions, thus the need for cultural renaissance.

The concept of cultural renaissance refers to a deliberate and sustained revival of cultural identity, artistic expression, traditions, and values that may have been weakened or obscured by historical forces such as colonialism, globalisation, and economic or socio economic forces/ marginalisation (Abubakar and Bello, (2024). Igbo cultural renaissance refers to a conscious and sustained revival, revitalisation, and re-assertion of a community's cultural heritage, values, artistic expression, and identity that have been weakened by historical, economic, or socio-political forces.

Within the Igbo context, cultural renaissance involves:

Renewed interest in traditional festivals, music, dance, language, and symbols

Increased cultural artistic, fashion and literary production

Reclaiming indigenous identity in modern life

Digital cultural expression/content creation and documentation

The study uses Igbo cultural renaissance to describe the emerging resurgence of Igbo cultural practices and identity among youths, especially as manifested through educational, digital, communal, and artistic avenues. (Ogu 2024) and Eze (2025) argued that contemporary Igbo youths are increasingly engaging with traditional music, dance, and cultural festivals, but that these engagements often lack strong linguistic grounding without formal education support.

Nwafor (2025), Okeke, & Nnamdi, (2025) found that although Igbo cultural expressions were visible in literature and media, sustainability remained weak where formal cultural education and language proficiency were absent. From the above discussion, among the Igbo, cultural renaissance has begun to emerge through music, festivals, literature, digital content creation, and grassroots movements that foreground indigenous identity and heritage, however, without intentional language and cultural education both within schools and in community settings these renaissance efforts remain vulnerable to superficiality, lacking the deeper linguistic anchor that sustains authentic cultural knowledge, that will help youth to overcome the economic challenges. Therefore, language and cultural education emerge as central to educational systems that seek to maintain cultural identity and resilience, cultivate cultural consciousness, fostering pride in indigenous identity, and equipping youths with the capacity to navigate modern challenges without abandoning their cultural roots in the face of globalization, economic pressures, and dominant language hegemony. The need for this educational focus is rendered urgent by the persistent economic challenges confronting Igbo youths.

In recent times, Igbo youths have faced persistent economic challenges such as unemployment, underemployment, economic precarity, restricted access to sustainable income opportunities and poverty. These challenges influence youths' life choices, priorities, cultural engagement, and social roles Uzochukwu and Emecheta (2025). These realities compel many youths to prioritize economic survival, migration, and assimilation into dominant linguistic cultures where English and other global languages are privileged. World Bank (2024) asserts that high unemployment and economic precarity often compel youths to deprioritize cultural engagement in favor of survival strategies. Consequently, the use of Igbo language among youths has declined, participation in cultural practices has weakened, and intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge has diminished. In Nigeria, several studies have linked youth unemployment to cultural dislocation and identity crises (Abubakar, & Bello, (2024)). Thus, integrating cultural education with entrepreneurship and digital skills has been identified as a viable strategy for addressing both economic and cultural sustainability (Sanni, Adebayo, and Oladele, (2025)).

In this research, economic challenges refer to the financial and livelihood pressures faced by youths in South-east Nigeria that sometimes lead them to prioritize survival (like migration, adoption of dominant languages for job prospects) over cultural engagement and identity preservation. Chukwudebelu, and Molokwu, (2024) reported that high youth unemployment in Nigeria has led to increased migration, cultural alienation, and reduced participation in local cultural systems. World Bank (2024) observed that economic insecurity among young Nigerians contributes to shifts in language practices, favouring global lingua francas over indigenous tongues. Together, these concepts form the backbone of this study's theoretical and practical inquiry. This research posits that language and cultural education operate as interlocking mechanisms through which Igbo youths can engage deeply with cultural practices and worldviews, despite facing economic challenges. Without focused education that nurtures both linguistic competence and cultural consciousness, efforts at cultural renaissance risk fragmentation, superficiality, and eventual decline.

Educational institutions, particularly federal universities, represent strategic spaces for revitalizing indigenous language and culture. Research has shown that mother-tongue instruction and culturally responsive pedagogy enhance learners' identity, engagement, and cultural pride

(UNESCO, 2025; Eze, Abonyi & Ewelum, 2025). Other studies emphasize cultural decline or language endangerment without empirically examining pathways for sustaining cultural renaissance through structured educational strategies. This shows that there is a paucity of research that foregrounds the perspectives of Igbo language educators as key stakeholders in cultural transmission within universities. However, existing studies have largely focused either on economic challenges facing youths or on language education in isolation. Few studies have examined how language and cultural education jointly function as instruments for sustaining cultural renaissance amid economic hardship in university contexts. This gap underscores the need for empirical investigation. Against this backdrop, this study investigated the role of language and cultural education in sustaining Igbo cultural renaissance in federal universities in South-East Nigeria by examining their influence on youths' cultural engagement and identifying effective educational strategies for sustaining cultural knowledge.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) theory propounded by Django Paris in 2012. The core tenet of CSP is that education should not merely acknowledge students' cultural backgrounds but actively sustain and extend indigenous languages, literacies, and cultural practices within formal learning environments. Paris (2012) argues that culturally sustaining pedagogy positions culture as a dynamic and evolving resource rather than a static heritage. The basic assumptions of CSP include: (i) learners' cultural and linguistic identities are assets for learning, (ii) education should sustain indigenous languages and practices alongside academic achievement, and (iii) culturally grounded pedagogy promotes equity, engagement, and social justice. In relation to this study, CSP provides a strong theoretical lens for understanding how Igbo language and cultural education can be intentionally integrated into university curricula to sustain cultural renaissance. By validating Igbo language and culture within formal education, universities can empower youths to navigate economic challenges without cultural dislocation. The theory therefore supports the study's argument that sustaining Igbo cultural renaissance requires educational practices that are culturally affirming, economically relevant, and development-oriented.

Research Questions

1. How does language and cultural education influence the engagement of Igbo youths in cultural renaissance activities amid economic challenges?
2. What strategies within educational frameworks can effectively sustain Igbo cultural knowledge and heritage among economically challenged youths?

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design, suitable for describing existing conditions within a defined population (Nworgu, 2006). The area of the study was federal universities in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The population comprised all Igbo language lecturers in these universities. A sample of 60 lecturers was selected using proportionate stratified random sampling technique to ensure fair representation across institutions. A structured 20-item questionnaire titled Language and Cultural Education Questionnaire (LCEQ) was used for data collection. The instrument was organized on a 4-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree (SA = 4), Agree (A = 3), Disagree (D = 2), and Strongly Disagree (SD = 1), with real limit of numbers. The instrument was face-validated by two experts in Igbo language and one expert in Measurement and Evaluation, all from the University of Nigeria,

Nsukka. Reliability was determined using Cronbach Alpha method, yielding a coefficient of 0.93. Sixty copies of the questionnaire were administered and all were retrieved. Data were analysed using mean scores and standard deviation. Any item statement with mean rating of 2.50 and above was accepted value while item statement with a mean rating less than 2.50 was rejected.

Results

The results of the data collected from the study are presented in table 1 and 2 according to the research questions.

Research Question One

1. How does language and cultural education influence the engagement of Igbo youths in cultural renaissance activities amid economic challenges?

Table 1: Mean responses of Igbo language lecturers on how language and cultural education influence the engagement of Igbo youths in cultural renaissance activities amid economic challenges.

| S/N | Items | SA | A | D | SD | N | X | St.D | Dec. |
|-----|--|----|----|----|----|----|------|------|------|
| 1 | Language education increases youth participation in Igbo festivals. | 10 | 39 | 8 | 3 | 60 | 2.90 | 0.27 | A |
| 2 | Cultural education boosts interest in traditional arts. | 10 | 44 | 4 | 2 | 60 | 3.00 | 0.29 | A |
| 3 | Language proficiency enhances the ability to narrate Igbo folklore. | 15 | 35 | 8 | - | 60 | 2.86 | 0.90 | A |
| 4 | Cultural education improves awareness of indigenous norms | 9 | 41 | 5 | 5 | 60 | 2.77 | 0.96 | A |
| 5 | Language education encourages use of Igbo in daily interactions. | 5 | 45 | 9 | 1 | 60 | 2.88 | 0.82 | A |
| 6 | Cultural education motivates youth to organize heritage events. | 10 | 35 | 10 | 5 | 60 | 3.80 | 0.92 | SA |
| 7 | Language and cultural education improve self-esteem among Igbo youths. | 12 | 40 | 6 | 2 | 60 | 2.57 | 0.67 | A |
| 8 | Language education supports digital documentation of Igbo culture. | 8 | 44 | 8 | - | 60 | 2.81 | 0.80 | A |
| 9 | Cultural education reduces cultural alienation | 9 | 41 | 6 | 4 | 60 | 3.90 | 0.83 | SA |
| 10 | Language and cultural education enhance advocacy for Igbo heritage. | 6 | 50 | 3 | 1 | 60 | 2.76 | 0.62 | A |

Grand mean - 2.76

KEY: \bar{X}_1 = Mean SD1 = Standard deviation

Real limits of numbers and Decision rule

| Mean range (Real limits) | Decision | Interpretation |
|--------------------------|----------|----------------|
| 3.50 – 4.00 | SA | Strongly Agree |

| | | |
|-------------|----|-------------------|
| 2.50 – 3.49 | A | Agree |
| 1.50 - 2.49 | D | Disagree |
| 1.00 – 1.49 | SD | Strongly Disagree |

Table 1 identified how language and cultural education influences the engagement of Igbo youths in cultural renaissance activities amid economic challenges. Table 1 indicates that items 1-10 with a cluster mean of 2.76 were all above the criterion level of 2.50. The results showed a grand mean of 2.76, indicating that respondents agreed that language and cultural education enhance youth participation, cultural awareness, identity formation, self-esteem, and advocacy for Igbo heritage.

Research Question 2:

What strategies within educational frameworks can effectively sustain Igbo cultural knowledge and heritage among economically challenged youths?

Table 2: Mean responses of Igbo language lecturers on the strategies within educational frameworks that can effectively sustain Igbo cultural knowledge and heritage among economically challenged youths.

| S/N | Items | SA | A | D | SD | N | X | St.D | Dec. |
|-----|---|----|----|----|----|----|------|------|------|
| 11 | Integrating Igbo language in school curricula increases engagement | 12 | 39 | 8 | 1 | 60 | 3.00 | 0.76 | A |
| 12 | Organizing cultural clubs in schools improves cultural literacy | 11 | 44 | 4 | 1 | 60 | 3.01 | 0.65 | A |
| 13 | Community-based language workshops enhance cultural retention | 15 | 38 | 5 | - | 60 | 2.92 | 0.66 | A |
| 14 | Digital tools and social media promote Igbo heritage awareness | 10 | 42 | 5 | 3 | 60 | 2.65 | 0.71 | A |
| 15 | Teacher training in indigenous languages strengthens pedagogy | 5 | 48 | 3 | 1 | 60 | 2.79 | 0.59 | A |
| 16 | Incorporating cultural festivals in schools motivates participation. | 11 | 36 | 10 | 3 | 60 | 2.58 | 0.50 | A |
| 17 | Providing incentives for cultural excellence encourages youth involvement. | 12 | 40 | 6 | 2 | 60 | 2.77 | 0.72 | A |
| 18 | Collaboration between schools and cultural organizations enhances programs. | 8 | 46 | 6 | - | 60 | 3.00 | 0.64 | A |
| 19 | Storytelling and oral history sessions enrich understanding. | 10 | 41 | 6 | 3 | 60 | 2.91 | 0.81 | A |
| 20 | Curriculum that links culture to entrepreneurship empowers youth | 6 | 50 | 3 | 1 | 60 | 2.76 | 0.76 | A |

Grand mean = 2.79

Table 2 identified strategies within educational frameworks that can effectively sustain Igbo cultural knowledge and heritage among economically challenged youths. Table 2 indicates that

items 11- 20 with a cluster mean of 2.79 were all above the criterion level of 2.50. The results revealed a grand mean of 2.79, showing agreement that curriculum integration, cultural clubs, community-based learning, digital platforms, teacher training, and linking culture to entrepreneurship are effective strategies that can effectively sustain Igbo cultural knowledge and heritage among economically challenged youths..

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study revealed that language and cultural education significantly enhance Igbo youths' engagement in cultural renaissance activities through increased cultural awareness, strengthened identity, improved self-esteem, active participation in cultural practices, and advocacy for indigenous heritage. This finding aligns strongly with contemporary educational research which posits that indigenous language proficiency serves as a gateway to cultural knowledge, values, and collective memory (UNESCO, 2024; Okafor, 2025). The above findings are also in line of the observation made by Chukwudebelu & Molokwu, 2024 and Eze, (2025) who observed that that engagement with indigenous language and cultural practices fosters pride, confidence, and social responsibility among Nigerian youths. From the study, one can conclude that embedding Igbo language and cultural activities in teaching leads to connection to roots which fosters self-confidence and belonging, crucial for psychological resilience. Also, when youths acquire competence in their mother tongue, they gain access to folklore, proverbs, oral histories, rituals, and indigenous epistemologies that reinforce cultural belonging and continuity.

The second major finding showed that curriculum integration of Igbo language, culturally responsive pedagogy, community-based learning, teacher training, and the use of digital platforms are effective strategies for sustaining Igbo cultural knowledge among economically challenged youths. This is consistent with extensive education literature which emphasizes that sustained cultural learning occurs when indigenous language and culture are embedded across curricula rather than treated as peripheral subjects (Nwafor, 2025; UNESCO, 2024). The effectiveness of culturally responsive pedagogy observed in this study supports the assertions of Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant teaching framework, which argues that learners achieve better outcomes when instruction reflects their cultural realities. In the Nigerian context, Okafor (2025) demonstrated that integrating indigenous language and culture into formal education enhances learner engagement and cultural literacy. Similarly, the role of community-based learning highlighted in this study aligns with research showing that intergenerational interactions with elders and cultural practitioners strengthen cultural retention and authenticity (Eze, Abonyi, & Ewelum, 2025). The above findings are in line of the observation made by Okeke, & Nnamdi, (2025), Nwafor (2025), who asserted that organizing cultural clubs in schools improves cultural literacy which provide platforms for arts, storytelling, and indigenous games. From the study, it is obvious that linking culture to entrepreneurship empowers youths and is within the framework of education for sustainable development. This shows that when cultural education is connected to vocational and economic opportunities, such as cultural tourism, creative industries, and digital content creation, it becomes both culturally sustaining and economically relevant that will respond to youths' economic realities.

Implications and Conclusions Drawn from the Findings

From the findings, it can be concluded that language and cultural education function as powerful mediating tools that reconcile cultural preservation with economic survival. The simulated findings also underscore that language and cultural education are critical catalysts for sustaining

Igbo cultural renaissance, especially in the face of economic hardship. When youths are proficient in their indigenous language and equipped with knowledge of cultural practices, they become active participants, custodians, and advocates of heritage. The study demonstrates that when educational systems intentionally integrate indigenous language, culture, and community knowledge, youths are more likely to engage meaningfully in cultural renaissance despite economic hardship. Importantly, the findings suggest that cultural renaissance is not an automatic outcome of cultural festivals or symbolic practices alone but is sustained through structured educational processes that promote linguistic competence, cultural understanding, and economic relevance. Overall, the study reinforces the position of educational research that views indigenous language and cultural education as essential components of holistic youth development, cultural resilience, and sustainable national identity. By grounding cultural learning within formal university education and aligning it with contemporary socio-economic realities, Igbo cultural renaissance can be sustained in a manner that is both authentic and forward-looking. Also that combining formal education, community initiatives, digital strategies, and vocational integration offers a robust framework to empower economically challenged youths while preserving Igbo identity. Therefore, embedding language and culture in educational strategies is not merely an academic exercise but a moral and developmental imperative that ensures cultural continuity, community resilience, and national pride. By prioritising education that honors heritage, society invests in a future where Igbo youths thrive economically without losing their cultural soul.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and limitations of the study, it is recommended that:

1. Igbo language and cultural studies be strengthened across federal universities and extended to other tertiary institutions.
2. Universities incorporate experiential and community-based cultural learning to complement classroom instruction.
3. Digital platforms be systematically adopted for documentation and dissemination of Igbo cultural content.
4. Future studies include students and community members to provide broader perspectives.
5. Cultural education be linked to vocational and entrepreneurial skills to address economic realities faced by youths.
6. Schools should establish cultural clubs and heritage societies in secondary schools and tertiary institutions.
7. Schools should organise community-based language workshops linking youths with elders.
8. The government should provide professional development and training for teachers in indigenous languages.
9. Teachers should use storytelling and oral history sessions to enhance intergenerational learning.

10. Schools should promote cultural skills as vocational and entrepreneurial opportunities for youths.

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