

***A SPEECH AT THE MATRICULATION CEREMONY AT THE NATIONAL  
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PROJECT.***

I am very pleased that this batch of students which we see matriculating today, is the first batch of NTI students that to learn Obolo Language as a Subject in this great institution.

“The inculcation of permanent literacy” has been a major objective of primary education in Nigeria, but unfortunately, too few children have achieved it. Recent large-scale research in Africa, by UNESCO and the Association for The Development of Education in Africa, ADEA, has proved beyond doubt that one major factor for this failure is that a foreign language, not the first language of the children has been used for instruction. It is clear that the children learn better in their first language, while English Language can be taught well as a separate subject.

What is **literacy**? Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary: “the ability to read and write.” Note that this definition doesn’t include the ability to speak and understand English!

My own definition of a **literate person** is as follows: a person who is able to read and understand anything as he would have understood it if it was spoken, and who can write anything that he can say.

As Nigeria was once a colony of England, English became the language of education of this country. Similarly, Nigeria’s neighbouring countries, Benin, Niger, Chad and (eastern Cameroun), which were colonies of France, have French as their language of education. Even though initially the missionaries who started schools developed the local languages for education, the colonial government in Nigeria soon demanded that English should be used instead. This government only gave financial assistance to schools that used English for instruction. This remained the trend until independence, even though there had been important papers published which stressed that education using the child’s first language is much more effective than education through English, a foreign language.

In Europe and all developed countries, it is unheard of that a child would be taught in a foreign language. Children are always taught in their first language: French children are taught in French, Dutch children in Dutch, Italian children in Italian, Japanese children in Japanese, and so on. In giant China, where there are many languages, every language was developed and the children of the various ethnic groups are all taught in their first language throughout primary and often secondary education, while Chinese is the national language.

In Nigeria too there have long been doubts about the effectiveness of using English for instruction. From 1970-1976 we had the famous Six Year Primary Project where Yoruba children were instructed through Yoruba all through primary school, with expert teaching of English as a subject only. These pupils were ahead of mainstream pupils who had had only three years of mother tongue instruction.(From 1973 this project spread out from Ile-

Ife to other urban and non-urban areas of the former Western State.) After this, since 1977, the Federal Policy of Education stipulates that the medium of instruction should initially be “the language of immediate environment”. An Institute for Nigerian Languages was set up to develop writing systems for the local languages. This was initially situated in Lagos and later transferred to The Nigerian Educational Research & Development Centre (NERDC) in Abuja. They have Linguists working together with local communities to develop the writing system for their language. They have published the write-ups of these writing systems in a journal called “Orthographies of Nigeria”. Unfortunately this work was not given enough attention with insufficient funding channeled into it. Although some language groups benefited and their languages became taught in Colleges of Education and Universities over the nation (e.g. CoE at Katsina Ala where the languages of Benue State are taught since the nineties).

Here in Obolo land (Andoni), comprising Andoni LGA and E.Obolo LGA in Akwa Ibom State, this work has already been done through the efforts of the Obolo Language and Bible Translation Project, supported by the entire Obolo people. The orthography of Obolo language was developed in the early eighties and published in the “Orthographies of Nigerian languages” series of NERDC in 1991. A series of Obolo Language readers for primaries 1 to 3 was also written and published in the eighties and nineties. The second reader was published by the Rivers Readers Project, a project of the Ministry of Education and the Faculty of Humanites, University of Port Harcourt. These books came with accompanying notes and schemes for teachers. In 1988, the Commissioner for Education in Rivers State, Retired Capt. Elechi Amadi, attended the closing ceremony of the first Obolo Language Workshop for all primary school teachers in Obolo land and handed out the certificates to the teachers.

From 1985 to 1991, there were three pilot schools where the teaching of Obolo Language was tested and the materials were constantly improved. These were CPS Agwut Obolo, CPS Agana, and CPS Unyengala. There were some very interested findings, which came from other sources, not from the Obolo Project itself.

One was an essay writing competition in 1990/1991 organized by the Local Government Council which then comprised Bonny, Nkoro, Opobo and Obolo. Children from all these areas traveled to Bonny to write essays in English. Surprisingly, the first and second prizes were taken by pupils of CPS Agana, and the third prize by a pupil of CPS Agwut Obolo! How could this happen, while these children had spent much more time on reading and writing in the Obolo Language than in English? Apparently, their language ability had been well developed through the use of their first language.

The second result came from a PhD student, Mrs. Abigail Afiesimama, who was collecting data for her dissertation entitled: “Linguistic complexity in Rivers State: Implications for language use in primary education”, also in 1991. She did her research in schools in all the local government areas of the state (which then comprised the present Bayelsa State as well as present Rivers State). She tested literacy achievement by making children in primary six write an essay in English about their school. In Obolo she also made the children write this essay in Obolo language. Here she came to one of the pilot

schools, CPS Agana and one other school which she did not disclose. (At this time Obolo Language was taught widely). She expected that pupils in Port Harcourt metropolis would perform better because English and Pidgin English are used more there than in the rural areas. She said that children there also have “greater exposure to the mass media, to books, to better educated people and to better qualified teachers”. She also assumed that the schools in the LGAs that were farthest removed from Port Harcourt would perform worst. It proved however that the two Obolo schools took 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> positions, only beaten by University of Port Harcourt Demonstration School. The schools of the urban poor of Port Harcourt did performed much less than the Obolo schools. Further her hypothesis was correct in that the farthest remote LGAs performed worst. But Obolo was the third farthest removed LGA and performed best, apart from the elite school mentioned.

When the Obolo and English essays of the Obolo pupils were compared, it showed that those who did better in English, were the same ones who did better in Obolo also. This also shows that there is a connection between performance in mother tongue and in English languages.

NTI matriculating student, I wish you success. May you learn to teach better than all others before you as you will learn Obolo Language better! Even non-Obolo speakers, e.g. from Bonny, are interested to learn something about the use of mothertongue in education, and by God`s grace, other languages around here will be developed as well as Obolo.