

“QUALITY EDUCATION, LANGUAGE(S) OF INSTRUCTION, AND LEARNING OUTCOMES”

**AN ADDRESS PRESENTED AT THE CELEBRATION OF THE UNESCO
INTERNATIONAL MOTHER LANGUAGE DAY AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM,
OLD GRA, PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE, ON FEBRUARY 23, 2016,
BY DR. UCHE E. AARON, SIL INTERNATIONAL TRANSLATION
CONSULTANT, IN CHARGE OF OBOLO LANGUAGE AND BIBLE
TRANSLATION ORGANIZATION (OLBTO)**

The Special Guests of Honor: Your Excellency, Chief (Barr.) Nyesom Ezenwo Wike CON,
Executive Governor of Rivers State

Your Excellency, Deacon Udom Gabriel Emmanuel, Executive Governor of Akwa
Ibom State

Chairman of the occasion, HRH. N. L. A. Iraron JP, Ede-Obolo II, Òkaań Ama of Egwede

Guests of Honor: Barr. Rufus Godwin, Head of Service Government of Rivers State

Hon. Mrs. Tonye Briggs Oniyide, Honorable Commissioner for Culture and
Tourism

Hon. Victor Ere, Chairman CTC, Andoni Local Government Area

Hon. Edwin Ubulom, Transition Chairman, Eastern Obolo LGA

Royal Fathers of the Day: HRH Ubooń (Dr.) Ujile D. Ngere, Òkaań Ama of Ngo

HRH King (Dr.) I. U. Otuo IX (JP), Òkaań Ama of Unyeada Kingdom

HRH King (Sir) Aaron Ikuru, Òkaań Ama of Ikuru Town

Obolo Chiefs from Akwa Ibom and Abia States

Mother of the Day: Prof. (Mrs.) Charity Okujagu, Associate Dean, Faculty of Science,
University of Port Harcourt

Chief Host: Mr. Omolayo Ralph Fadamijo, Curator, National Commission for Museums
and Monuments, Port Harcourt

Special Guests: Comrade Anthony Emmanuel Ntedeng, President, West African Maritime
Workers Union

Sir. Cyrus T. Nkangwung, Chairman, Ida Obolo

Prof. John H. Enemugwem, Dean, Dept. of Humanities, University of Port Harcourt

Master of Ceremony: Dr. Ayuwu Jones, University of Port Harcourt

Invited Schools

Lords Spiritual and Temporal

Other Royal Highnesses and Traditional Rulers here present

All Uniformed Organizations

Gentlemen of the Press

Ladies and Gentlemen

All Speakers of Obolo and Speakers of other Languages here present
All other protocols observed.

Dear ones, you are all welcome to this historically unique occasion. *Ebi Obolo, usen ya îre! Obolo îbolo!* (Obolo people, the day has come! Obolo is awakened!) We are extremely grateful to you, the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Port Harcourt. You have made our dream to come true. Today, on the 2016 UNESCO Mother Language Day, Obolo language is not only being recognized at the federal level in Nigeria, it is also being registered at the universal level through the United Nations. It is *Okumugwem* (Yahweh), who has brought this to pass. Praise be to His name! The Board of Trustees of Obolo Language and Bible Translation Organization, the Executive Committee, and all Obolo people, congratulations to you all for this great and historic accomplishment!

Obolo language, one of the 535 languages in Nigeria, belongs in Lower Cross sub-branch of the Delta Cross branch of the Eastern Division of the South Central Niger Congo language family, along with Iko, Ibino, Oron, Eket, Annang, Ibibio, Efik, etc. In terms of ethnicity, the Iko, Ibino, Oron, and Obolo are of the same ethnic identity, and we have enjoyed our relationship, from our ancestry, as members of the expanded Obolo nation (Ido Obolo). The development work on Obolo language was initiated in 1977 under the auspices of the Rivers Readers Project, which was instituted by late Prof. Kay Williamson, and in 1978, the Obolo Language Committee was formed. In 1980, the Obolo Bible Translation Committee was formed, and both were fused into Obolo Language and Bible Translation Organization (OLBTO) in 1981, and was linked to the Nigeria Bible Translation Trust (NBTT) which has provided the technical and professional oversight to OLBTO since then till date. In 1992, the Obolo New Testament was dedicated, and on May 24, 2014, the whole Bible in Obolo language was dedicated, the 23rd of its kind in Nigeria, the 184th in Africa, and the 515th in the whole world. This brought to an end, the Bible Translation track of the work of OLBTO. Other accomplishments in this aspect of the work include the Jesus Film through the Great Commission Movement, and audio version of the New Testament through Faith Comes By Hearing. The latest and very significant baby of OLBTO is the creation of the Obolo Language website, with the name “*Ida Obolo*” and the address www.obololanguage.org. On this website, everything about OLBTO can be found, and from it the whole Bible in Obolo language can be downloaded, even onto android phones. The Literacy track of the work started before the translation track, and is still continuing after the dedication of the whole Bible.

In the UNESCO Report of 1953, it was stated, “It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue,... we recommend that the use of the mother tongue be extended to as late a stage in education as possible” (UNESCO 1953b:11,47). Among the most salient reasons generally given for the use of the mother tongue are the following:

(1) Psychologically, it is generally agreed by educationists and psychologists that a child should first learn to read and write in the language spoken in his home and in which his first verbal communication with parents and siblings takes place. When this foundation has been laid, he can acquire a full command of his own language, and if necessary, of other languages. Without it, there is danger that he will never achieve a thorough command of any language. (2) The mother tongue plays an indispensable role in the formation of the child's concepts of the world and his categories of thought. It forms a natural and easy means for further linguistic, intellectual, and emotional development. It is a medium used to integrate the work of the classroom with the experience of the children outside the school. (3) Educationally, the nature of learning to read, by itself, presents the most significant reason for using the mother tongue. Learning to read involves four major stages, viz. perceiving or recognizing words, grasping or comprehending meanings, reacting to the ideas acquired, and integrating what has been read. It is impossible to carry out such a program in a language that is not well known to the student. (4) The process of beginning to read consists of association of written symbols with oral symbols. If the language is well known already, then reading becomes a process of learning the symbols of the spoken language. But, if the language is foreign, then reading becomes a process of trying to associate strange symbols to non-existent and meaningless spoken forms. This is a source of great confusion, boredom, and ultimate drop out of school. Apart from reading, even in arithmetic (i.e. numeracy), it is very difficult to learn the concepts of numerical process when the student does not have a grasp of the meanings behind the words being used. According to Ayo Banjo (1995), the Ife Six-Year Primary Project experiment has shown that initial teaching in the mother tongue yields greater dividends later for the learner than initial teaching in a second language. Also, the Yoruba experiment showed that literacy in the mother tongue has a positive transfer effect on literacy in a second language. In this way, the use of the mother tongue is a bridge to the prestige/second language, it facilitates the mastery of the second language. Therefore, given the overwhelmingly poor educational standard being experienced in most parts of our country, Nigeria, bilingual education is the ideal for all the citizens.

However, some people have argued that, given the multilingual nature of our country (535 languages) and the unequal sizes of the various language groups, this ideal is not easy to realize without sacrificing national unity. Actually, it is a huge financial burden on the nation. But, on the contrary, it promotes national unity and patriotism. The development and encouragement of use of the mother tongue in schools is a pointer to the speakers that they are recognized by the government. Therefore they willingly identify with the government. Bilingual Education, which was started in the Soviet Union in 1918, was one of the most latent uniting factors that held together the many different ethnic groups (over eighty indigenous languages) of the former Soviet Union into one monolithic entity called Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). In addition to the social bonding, the positive

transfer effect on literacy in the prestige language, Russian, and the accompanying advantage of high quality education and good learning outcomes that result from bilingual education, catapulted USSR into being one of the most technologically advanced nations of the world. Today, the same thing is holding true for China, India, etc. We also want the same for our country Nigeria, beginning from Obolo. It is not for nothing that the Federal Government of Nigeria created a National Policy on Education that stipulates that the medium of instruction for the first three years of a child's education should be the language of the immediate environment.

All these proposals and positive results have also been experienced in Obolo land through the Literacy track of OLBTO. By 1984, the Obolo orthography was fully developed, and published by the Nigerian Educational and Development Council (NERDC) in 2000. In 1985, under the auspices of Mrs. Maria Aaron, the Literacy Consultant, the first Reader (Adasi Ikpa Obolo) was drafted, tested and published under the Rivers Readers Project. In accordance with the National Policy on Education, and with the cooperation of the Local Government Education authorities, OLBTO tested the Reader and taught Obolo in Primary Schools. Teachers were trained to teach Obolo, and a few of the schools were adopted as Pilot Schools. The Pilot Schools were more monitored, and had many more trained teachers than the ordinary schools. In 1986, the second Reader (Ikpa Obolo Òso Iba) was published, and the third Reader (Gwuñ Ogwu Obolo (the Obolo Child)), was published in 1993. Each one of these had its own Scheme of Work and Teachers Notes. For the training of teachers, a Workshop Guide was published. Readers for Elementary Four to Six are currently being developed and tested. For Junior Secondary school and public readership, Mbuban Íchaka (a literature book), has been published. Other supplementary publications include the Alphabet Chart, Reading and Writing Obolo, Ikpa Uròk (book of folktales), many editions of Ida Obolo (voice of Obolo magazine), many editions of Ida Obolo Eyi Nsabon (magazine for children) which is made up of articles and stories written by school children themselves. The Obolo Dictionary is in the pipeline, at an advanced stage. One very special contribution is the Aya Ifuk (new counting system). Through this, numeracy (in base ten) is established in Obolo language. Today, in Obolo language, it is possible to count from one to trillion. This is something that is not possible in many Nigerian languages. The counting system is published both as a chart to be hung on walls, and as a booklet for children to carry around in their pockets. All these publications are documented in the book of the history of OLBTO. These, and many other publications not mentioned above, are present here on display and for sale.

Three notable results emanated from all these efforts in the area of Literacy, as empirical data that confirm the findings of UNESCO. First, in 1990, there was an English Essay Contest written by Elementary Six pupils from the four units of the Bonny LGA (namely Obolo, Opobo, Nkoro, and Bonny), in Bonny town. By that time, the pupils who had

started to learn basic literacy in Obolo language from Elementary One in our pilot schools were then in Elementary Six. So, these were the ones who wrote the essay. When the results were published, all the three prizes were won by Obolo pilot schools closest to the OLBTO office, where the pilot teachers were directly involved.

Secondly, in 1991, a doctoral candidate of the University of Port Harcourt (PH), Mrs. Abigail Afiesimama, working under the supervision of Prof. Kay Williamson, chose for her PhD Thesis topic, “Linguistic Complexity in Rivers State: Implications for Language Use in Primary Education.” Her focus was on the implementation of the National Policy on Education as it affects the Language of the Immediate Environment in Rivers State, then comprising the present Rivers and Bayelsa States. For her data, she collected English essays with the topic, “My School,” from Primary Six in all the thirteen LGAs in the then Rivers State. Her hypothesis was that the best performing school would be a PH urban elite school, followed by a PH urban poor school (i.e. any ordinary government primary school in PH) because of the dominant use of the English language in various aspects of life in the urban area. She then postulated that the performance would diminish progressively with distance from PH, the State headquarters. This meant that the farthest removed schools from PH would be the worst performers. At that time, Obolo schools were the second farthest removed schools in the state, which meant that they were destined to be the second poorest performers. Afiesimama made the Obolo pupils to also write the same essay in Obolo language. When the essays were graded, in accordance with her hypothesis, the University of Port Harcourt Demonstration Primary school, an urban elite school, came first. But after that, the unexpected happened. The second best school was an Obolo pilot school, and the third was also another Obolo school. After that, the next best performer was a PH urban poor school, and the rest of the results followed exactly in accordance with the postulations in her hypothesis. So, in the whole state, Obolo schools, where basic literacy was taught in the Obolo language before transition into English, came second and third in the whole of Rivers State (i.e. the present Rivers and Bayelsa States). Also, apart from the Obolo schools, no other school was able to write the essay in their own language. From this, it is very clear that when a child acquires basic literacy in his/her mother tongue, it is easy to transfer such skills to, and excel in literacy, in any other language. These and other details were documented by Mrs. Maria Aaron (1994, and 1996).

Thirdly, in attestation of the authenticity of UNESCO’s recommendation that the use of the mother tongue be extended to as late a stage in education as possible, there is an empirical data that confirms the importance of using Obolo language as medium of instruction at a higher level. The National Teachers Institute (NTI) authorized the Obolo Literacy personnel to teach the course entitled, Linguistic Studies of the Language of the Immediate Environment, at their branch at Ngo, headquarters of Andoni LGA, in fulfilment of the requirements of the National Policy on Education. As a result of this, the students

at NTI, Ngo, are testifying to the fact that they understand English grammar better after hearing the same topics taught in Obolo. At first, the class was usually small because the students did not think that Obolo language had anything to contribute to their learning experience. But now, many more students are joining the class and their results are better by far than ever before.

On the basis of these enthusiastic positive results, OLBTO is establishing an Obolo Bilingual Education Institution, comprising an Elementary School, a Technical Secondary School, and a Polytechnic. The motive behind the proposal of a tertiary institution is the development of Obolo land, to transform Obolo land into a center of diverse enterprises and industries, with enormous job opportunities. The reason for proposing a Polytechnic rather than a University is that while universities dwell more on theory, polytechnics combine both theory and practice. The Elementary School wing of the institution has already commenced at Agwut Obolo under the name, Obolo Bilingual Education Centre (OBEC). Elementary One took off in 2014, Elementary Two in 2015, and Elementary Three is starting in September 2016. Some of the pupils and a teacher from the Centre are here today to represent the school. The leader of this program is Maria Aaron, an advanced PhD student of Bilingual Education at the University of Reading, in the United Kingdom. In order to teach the pupils in Obolo, the Literacy team in charge of the program runs Terminology Workshops from time to time on the different topics such as science and technology, mathematics, computer, social studies, religious knowledge, agriculture, English language, etc., in order to obtain the necessary metalanguage for these subjects, as is the case in the nine Nigerian regional languages (e.g. Yoruba, Hausa, Ibo, etc.). Then small editions of the books are printed out locally for both the teachers and pupils. These books are here on display for all to see. These terminologies will also be included in the Dictionary of Obolo language. The teachers are trained in Bilingual Education principles and procedures. It is interesting to see the interaction between the teacher and the pupils, even in Elementary One, demonstrating the modern way of instructing through discovery learning, group work, and reporting together. All of this is facilitated through the medium of Obolo language, which is widely understood and utilized by both the teacher and pupils, using objects and concepts that are available in the culture and geography of the area. Obolo language is rich in expressions and full of deep meaning, much of which is not easily translatable into English.

In the curriculum for the proposed Polytechnic, in addition to the normal Engineering, Accountancy, and other courses, some special courses that are very relevant to the development of Obolo land are proposed. One of these special courses is **Agriculture** with special emphasis on **Fisheries**, **Food Crops**, and **Forestry**. We want to preserve the different species of fish, shell fish, crabs, and crustaceans, that are unique to Obolo waters, and to multiply them quantitatively. We want to discover what kinds of food crops our soil

can produce, and how Obolo can become self-reliant as far as food production is concerned. We also want to preserve the animal and vegetation species that are unique to Obolo environment, as well as preserving our forests for tourism etc. One of the important and almost extinct animal species is the elephant. So the concept of elephant sanctuary, as proposed by our brother Gogo Ujile, is already in the plan, and will attract the support of OLBTO.

From all of the above, it is evident that the language of instruction is the crucial determinant of the quality of education, and learning outcomes. Moreover, it is clear from all the discussion, that an outstanding learning outcome, which is a measure of quality education, is most certainly attained when the language of instruction is the mother tongue. The Obolo example is a clear attestation of this conclusion. OLBTO is determined to pursue this to the end, i.e. the full-fledged development of Obolo land. The objective of OLBTO is to develop and maintain the Obolo intangible heritage (our language), with the view to developing and maintaining our tangible heritage (the geography and history of the land). The impact of the work of the organization is felt in both sectors, both of which affect the sociology and economy of Obolo land. Obolo people know this, and have supported the work with all their heart. It is therefore worth mentioning here that 99% of the sponsorship for all of these achievements is borne by Obolo citizens. The poor contribute from their poverty, and the rich contribute from their abundance. No one wants to be left out. On the same note, Obolo people, I lay before you today a very pressing need. Elementary Three of the OBEC is starting in September this year, 2016. But we have no class room for it in the Bible House where the other classes are being held. So, we desperately need a Primary School building. What will you about this? *Ebi Obolo*, please come out again *en masse* and support this noble objective as you did for the Bible, and help OLBTO to bring up a sound and respectable future generation for Obolo land.

Ebi Obolo, Usen ya îre! Obolo ibolo! (Let Obolo be awakened!)

Thanks to the National Commission for Museums and Monuments!

Thanks to the Nigeria Bible Translation Trust!

All praise and glory and honour be to the Almighty God, the Creator and Sustainer of Obolo!