

Attitude of Students to the Study of Urhobo in Delta State Tertiary Institutions

By

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Abstract

This study investigates the attitudes of Urhobo students toward the study of the Urhobo language in tertiary institutions within Delta State, Nigeria. Urhobo, an Edoid language, is primarily spoken in Delta State and is currently taught at two tertiary institutions: the College of Education, Warri, and Delta State University, Abraka. To collect relevant data, the study employed a non-probability convenience sampling technique to administer questionnaires to fifty students across the two institutions. The findings reveal that the attitude of Urhobo students toward the study of their indigenous language is largely negative. In response to this, the paper advocates for a change in students' attitudinal dispositions as well as an improvement in the societal value placed on Urhobo graduates, particularly in terms of job prospects and institutional recognition. The study concludes by recommending strategies for the revitalisation and development of the Urhobo language in line with contemporary educational and sociolinguistic realities.

Keywords: Urhobo language, language attitude, indigenous language education, tertiary institutions, language revitalisation, mother tongue

Introduction

This study explores the attitudes of students toward the study of Urhobo in tertiary institutions in Delta State, with a focus on Delta State University, Abraka, and the College of Education, Warri. These institutions were selected because they are the only higher institutions in Delta State, and indeed in Nigeria, where Urhobo is offered as a course of study at both the Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) and Nigerian Certificate in Education (N.C.E.) levels.

In this context, the term *Urhobo* refers not only to the language but also to the broader study of Urhobo culture, literature, people, science, technology, arts, biodiversity, religion, worldview, and related aspects of indigenous knowledge systems.

Over the years, scholars have made concerted efforts to promote the study of Urhobo and encourage the use of the language in both spoken and written forms. These efforts aim to counter the threat of language extinction that affects many minority languages across Nigeria and Africa. Despite such scholarly initiatives, attitudes toward the study of Urhobo remain largely negative.

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This is often attributed to factors such as the low prestige of the language, limited employment opportunities for graduates, inadequate or non-existent teaching materials, rural–urban migration, and the Nigerian government's failure to implement the National Language Policy effectively.

While previous research has examined attitudes toward the Urhobo language in domains such as worship (churches and traditional religious settings), the mass media, entertainment, marketplaces, homes, and at the primary and secondary education levels, there is a significant gap in research focusing specifically on students' attitudes toward the study of Urhobo in higher institutions. As Darah (2010:12) rightly points out, this area remains underexplored. This study, therefore, aims to fill that gap by investigating the attitudes of students enrolled in Urhobo programmes at the tertiary level and by identifying key challenges facing the discipline. The ultimate goal is to stimulate sustained positive interest in the language and encourage its development as a vehicle for education, cultural preservation, and modernisation.

The Urhobo language is currently facing a critical threat of endangerment, partly due to the sustained negative attitudes exhibited by students toward its study in tertiary institutions. These attitudes have contributed to the language being classified among the most endangered indigenous languages in Nigeria and Africa. The marginalisation of Urhobo in formal education and public life reflects a broader issue of linguistic underdevelopment that poses challenges for language policy and planning.

This study seeks to address some of these challenges by raising awareness about the implications of language endangerment and encouraging more favorable attitudes toward the study of Urhobo. The primary objective is to evaluate students' attitudes toward the language in order to identify the causes of disinterest and propose feasible solutions. Understanding and addressing these attitudes is crucial to reversing the decline of Urhobo and ensuring its relevance in contemporary academic, social, and professional domains.

Methodology

This research adopted a mixed-method approach involving questionnaires, interviews, and direct observation to gather data on students' attitudes toward the study of Urhobo. The main instrument, the *Urhobo Students' Response Questionnaire* (USRQ), consisted of two sections: personal data and attitudinal questions. The questionnaire included ten items structured on a Likert Scale format (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree).

The instrument was personally administered by the researcher to ensure high response rates, and all completed questionnaires were retrieved immediately. A total of fifty students participated in the study, 25 from the College of Education, Warri (covering NCE I–III) and 25 from Delta State University, Abraka (covering 100 to 400 level). Additionally, selected students were interviewed to obtain deeper insights into their attitudes. Data were analysed using simple frequency counts and percentage distributions.

Research Questions

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1. What factors motivate students to study Urhobo?
2. What employment opportunities exist for graduates of Urhobo?
3. What challenges do students face while studying Urhobo?
4. What level of prestige is associated with studying Urhobo?
5. What are parents' attitudes toward their children studying Urhobo in tertiary institutions?

Literature Review

The concepts of language and attitude are well-established in Nigerian and African sociolinguistic studies. These concepts relate to how individuals or communities perceive and respond to their language and cultural heritage. Attitudes can be positive, negative, or neutral, and such dispositions significantly influence the vitality of a language, either promoting its growth or accelerating its decline.

Numerous scholars have assessed the general attitudes of the Urhobo people toward the Urhobo language from diverse perspectives. Apene (2006), for instance, argues that Urhobo is among the world's endangered languages likely to become extinct if proactive measures are not taken. He attributes this threat to the increasing preference for English and Nigerian Pidgin among younger generations. Apene observes that a language not commonly spoken in markets, churches, urban areas, or even in some rural contexts faces an imminent risk of language death, with potentially dire consequences for the culture and identity of its speakers.

Kalu (2005), in a report titled "*For Dying Language and Culture, Urhobo Find Way Out*" published in *The Guardian*, reflects on two scholarly papers presented at the Sixth Annual Conference of the Urhobo Historical Society by Aziza and Mowarin of Delta State University, Abraka. These papers offered critical insights into the attitudinal decline toward Urhobo and possible strategies for linguistic revitalisation.

Aziza (2005) warns that the Urhobo language is gradually disappearing and risks becoming extinct if immediate and strategic steps are not taken. She emphasises the importance of using Urhobo regularly in homes, schools, social functions (including religious worship), commerce, and the mass media. Aziza highlights several reasons for the language's decline: the failure of families to speak Urhobo at home, cultural dilution through interethnic interactions and marriages, the influence of Western education, migration, and insufficient media support. Nevertheless, Aziza remains optimistic, suggesting that Urhobo can survive this language shift if effective steps are taken. She advocates for the production and distribution of affordable "Teach Yourself" Urhobo audio-visual materials, the establishment of radio and television stations broadcasting in Urhobo, and the creation of job opportunities for graduates of Urhobo. She further proposes using modern technology, such as mobile phones, computers, and the internet, to strengthen the use of the language. Aziza encourages technologists and linguists to "nativise" technology, following the example of Yoruba digital tools like the Konyin keyboard and Yoruba electronic dictionaries. She also calls on the Delta State Government to permit the use of Urhobo and Enuani (a dialect of Igbo) for legislative discussions at least once a week in the State House of Assembly. In line with this, Aziza insists that Urhobo must evolve from being merely a domestic language to becoming a tool for information dissemination through modern

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communication technologies. She stresses that all stakeholders must work together to ensure the relevance of Urhobo in the age of globalization and ICT-driven development.

Mowarin (2005), meanwhile, focuses specifically on Uvwie, a dialect of Urhobo, warning of its likely extinction if urgent steps are not taken. He differentiates the levels of endangerment between Uvwie and Urhobo and stresses the need to eliminate retrogressive elements of Urhobo culture to facilitate revitalisation. Mowarin identifies the dominance of Nigerian Pidgin in the Middle Belt and the broader hegemony of major Nigerian languages as factors leading to the marginalization of minority languages like Urhobo. This marginalization results in a loss of prestige and discourages younger speakers from using their native language. According to Mowarin, only those Nigerian languages that integrate into ICT systems will be sustainable in the future. He also highlights poor language attitudes, urbanisation, migration, and inter-dialectal shifts (e.g., some Uvwie families adopting the Agbarho dialect) as indicators of impending language death. Furthermore, he criticizes the Delta State Government for failing to provide institutional support for the teaching of Uvwie in schools and for neglecting efforts to build a literary tradition around the dialect. Mowarin warns that other dialects like Okpe may soon follow a similar trajectory, especially as urban development and inter-ethnic mingling intensify. However, he acknowledges the positive step taken by Delta State University in offering a Linguistics/Urhobo programme and by the Ministry of Education in introducing Urhobo in schools in Okpe and Uvwie communities.

The vitality of the Urhobo language has increasingly been threatened by the forces of globalization and the dominance of English in Nigeria's educational and social spaces. Scholars have argued that globalization, coupled with poor language policy implementation, lack of instructional materials, and insufficient orthographic standardization, has weakened the teaching and learning of indigenous languages such as Urhobo. These shortcomings have contributed to a general decline in students' interest in pursuing Urhobo as a course of study in higher institutions (Ejedafiru & Ejobee, 2024). In a similar vein, Mowarin (2023) observes that English and Nigerian Pidgin are progressively displacing Urhobo in both domestic and public domains, thereby reinforcing the perception that Urhobo lacks economic and academic value. Together, these findings underscore the broader sociolinguistic pressures that shape students' attitudes toward the study of Urhobo.

Despite these challenges, institutional and community-based interventions have attempted to rekindle interest in the language. Notably, cultural associations such as Ukoko R'Emoto have endowed scholarships for students studying Urhobo at Delta State University (DELSU), providing financial incentives intended to make the discipline more attractive (Punch, 2023; Urhobotoday, 2023). Such efforts demonstrate community commitment to preserving Urhobo and may play a role in encouraging positive attitudes among students. However, no systematic studies have yet been conducted to evaluate whether these initiatives actually influence student motivation or enrollment decisions in a significant way.

At the pedagogical level, Urhobo language instruction at tertiary institutions continues to be constrained by several factors, including the shortage of trained teachers, poorly developed curricula, and inadequate teaching materials. Ojarikre (2019) identifies these constraints as major

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impediments to effective learning, noting that they contribute to students' perception of Urhobo as less rewarding compared to other academic disciplines. In response to these challenges, Uguru (2021) advocates for more innovative teaching strategies, including the integration of oral literature, poetry, and technology-assisted methods to improve student engagement. Although these proposals are promising, the persistence of systemic barriers continues to hinder the effectiveness of Urhobo pedagogy in higher education.

Students' attitudes are also influenced by broader sociocultural factors. The weakening of intergenerational transmission has meant that fewer young people acquire Urhobo as their first language, while the stigma associated with speaking minority languages in public spaces further diminishes its perceived relevance (Okakuro, 2022). As a result, while some students may retain affective pride in Urhobo as a marker of cultural identity, many still view its instrumental value as limited when compared to disciplines with clearer career prospects and economic advantages. This tension between cultural pride and perceived utility reflects the ambivalent attitudes that many students hold toward the study of Urhobo.

Recent scholarship has also highlighted the potential of digital platforms to serve as tools for revitalizing the Urhobo language. Social media, messaging applications, and online resources have been sporadically employed to promote the language among younger generations (Akpojotor, 2023). Although there is little evidence of systematic adoption, these digital domains hold promise as spaces where Urhobo can become more visible and relevant to students. With appropriate institutional support, technology could play an important role in reshaping students' attitudes by embedding the language within contemporary forms of communication and social interaction.

Overall, the literature indicates that while there are ongoing efforts to sustain interest in the Urhobo language, a significant research gap remains. Most existing studies examine language shift, policy, or revitalization strategies at a general level and only infer student attitudes indirectly. Very few studies have employed empirical methods such as surveys or interviews to measure the specific attitudes of tertiary students toward studying Urhobo. This gap highlights the need for mixed-methods research that combines quantitative attitude scales with qualitative inquiry to capture the complexity of student perceptions and motivations. Addressing this gap would provide a clearer understanding of how students perceive the study of Urhobo and offer valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and cultural advocates seeking to strengthen the language's position in higher education.

In summary, the reviewed literature reflects a consensus among Urhobo scholars that the general attitude of the Urhobo people toward their language is largely negative. Apene (2006) emphasises the threat posed by English and Nigerian Pidgin; Aziza (2005) blames familial and societal neglect and proposes modern technological intervention; while Mowarin (2005) underscores the lack of institutional support and government policy implementation. Collectively, their works reveal that unless urgent, coordinated, and strategic efforts are undertaken, Urhobo, and its dialects, face a significant threat of extinction.

Theories of Language Attitude

The study of language attitudes is guided by two major theoretical approaches: the mentalist and the behaviourist theories. The mentalist theory views attitudes as internal mental states that influence individuals' behavior toward language use. Although these attitudes cannot be directly observed, they can be inferred through introspection or structured responses. This theory is widely adopted in sociolinguistic research because it helps explain why people choose to learn or avoid certain languages based on personal motivation and perception.

On the other hand, the behaviourist theory focuses on observable actions. It defines attitudes through measurable behaviors exhibited in social situations, without concern for internal thoughts or emotions. While this approach makes data collection straightforward, it may not fully capture the deeper reasons behind language behaviour.

This study adopts the mentalist perspective, as it provides a more comprehensive understanding of students' internal motivations and perceptions toward the study of Urhobo in tertiary institutions.

Presentation and Analysis of Data on Attitudes to the Study of Urhobo

This section analyses students' attitudes toward studying Urhobo in Delta State tertiary institutions by categorising their responses. Positive attitudes were identified through "Strongly Agree" and "Agree" responses, while negative attitudes were marked by "Disagree" and "Strongly Disagree." The analysis considers how students' age, institution, academic level, and sex relate to their attitudes toward the Urhobo language and programme. The aim is to understand the factors shaping these attitudes and to suggest ways of encouraging greater interest in the study of Urhobo.

Figure 1 provides insights into the reasons why students choose to study Urhobo in higher institutions. The statement required respondents to indicate whether admission difficulties influenced their decision to study Urhobo.

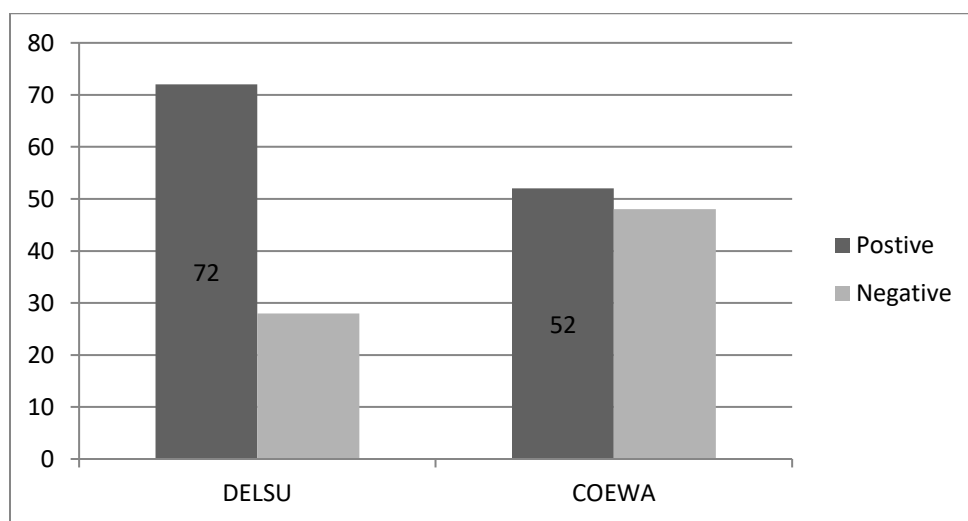


Figure 1: Respondents’ perception on whether students study Urhobo due to their inability to get their choice course

The data shows that many students in both DELSU and COEWA enrolled in the Urhobo programme primarily because of challenges in gaining admission into their preferred courses. At DELSU, 18 respondents (72%), the majority of whom were female, admitted that admission difficulties influenced their choice of Urhobo, while only 7 (28%) disagreed. A similar pattern was observed in COEWA, where 13 respondents (52%) affirmed this reason, compared to 12 respondents (48%) who disagreed.

These findings suggest that students’ attitudes toward studying Urhobo are shaped more by limited academic opportunities than by genuine interest in promoting or preserving the language. The gender distribution also indicates that female students are more represented in Urhobo programmes than their male counterparts in both institutions. Furthermore, the fact that those who “agreed” attributed their enrolment to admission difficulties may be interpreted as reflecting a negative attitude toward the study of Urhobo. In other words, many students appear to view the programme less as a course of genuine interest and more as a fallback option when access to their preferred fields of study is denied.

Figure 2 below presents the inference from the responses of students from Delta State University (DELSU) and the College of Education, Warri (COEWA), regarding the employment opportunities available to graduates of Urhobo.

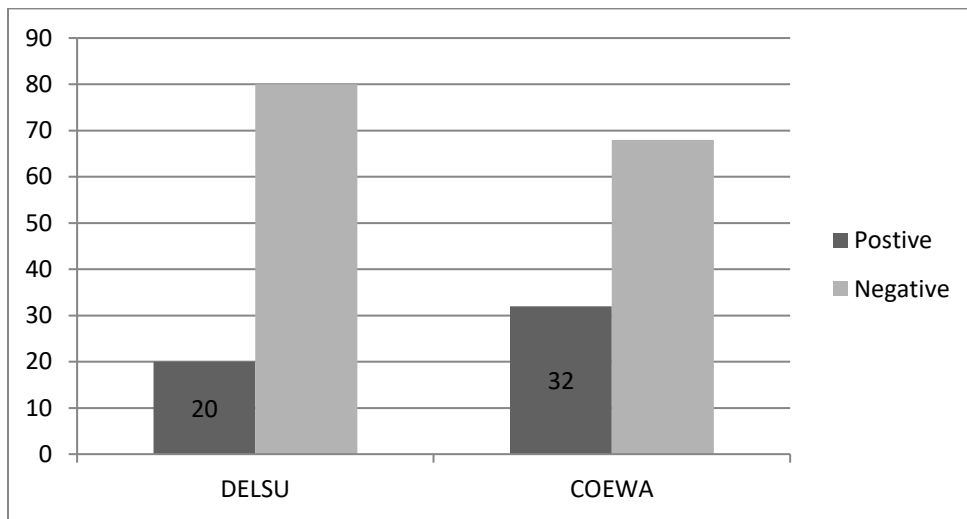


Figure 2: Respondents’ perception on job opportunities for graduates of Urhobo

The data shows that most students in both institutions hold a negative view of the job prospects available to Urhobo graduates. At DELSU, only 5 respondents (20%) expressed optimism about employment opportunities, while 20 (the majority, predominantly female) (80%) were doubtful. Similarly, in COEWA, 8 students (32%) indicated a positive outlook, compared to 17 (68%) who were pessimistic, with female students again forming the majority of the negative responses.

These findings suggest that concerns about poor employment prospects significantly shape students’ attitudes toward studying Urhobo. The perception that the programme offers limited career opportunities may discourage genuine interest and reinforce the tendency for students to treat Urhobo as a fallback rather than a preferred academic choice.

Figure 3 below presents the responses of DELSU and COEWA students on the challenges encountered by students studying Urhobo in tertiary institutions. In particular, it provides student’s perception on whether or other students studying Urhobo face (socio-psychological) challenges that can affect their academic performance. In this case, agreed correspond to positivity, that is, no significant challenges that can affect academic performance, whereas disagreed correspond to a negativity.

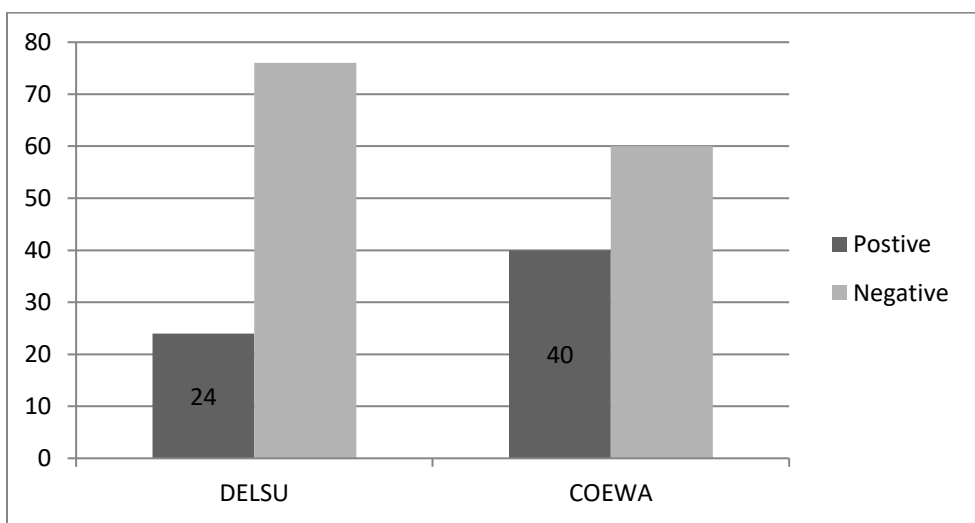


Figure 3: Respondents’ perception of challenges faced by students studying Urhobo

Figure 3 presents the responses of DELSU and COEWA students regarding the socio-psychological challenges encountered by students studying Urhobo in tertiary institutions, particularly whether such challenges could affect academic performance. In this context, “agree” corresponds to a positive view (i.e., no significant challenges that could hinder academic performance), while “disagree” reflects a negative view (i.e., recognition of challenges that may affect performance).

At DELSU, 6 students (3 males and 3 females), 24% responded positively, suggesting that they did not perceive major challenges in studying Urhobo. However, the majority, 19 students (17 females and 2 males), 76% disagreed, indicating that socio-psychological challenges do indeed affect students. Similarly, in COEWA, 10 students (8 females and 2 males) 40% responded positively, while a larger number, 20 students (17 females and 3 males) 60%, disagreed.

The results reveal that in both institutions, a significant proportion of students perceive the study of Urhobo as being associated with socio-psychological challenges that can negatively impact academic performance. Notably, female students dominate the group that expressed negative

perceptions in both institutions, suggesting that gender dynamics may play a role in shaping how such challenges are experienced or reported.

Figure 4 shows the responses of DELSU and COAWA Students on the prestige attached to the study of Urhobo.

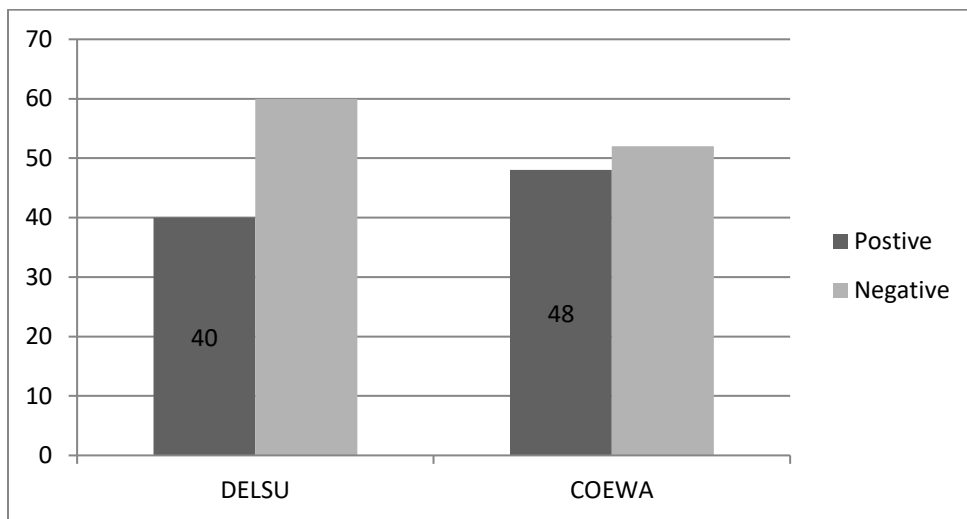


Figure 4: Students’ perception of the prestige attached to the study of Urhobo

At DELSU, only 10 out of 25 students considered the programme to be prestigious, with most of the positive responses coming from female students. However, the majority, 15 respondents, disagreed, indicating that they perceived little or no prestige in studying Urhobo. Again, female students made up a larger proportion of the negative responses. A similar pattern was observed in COEWA, where 12 students perceived the study of Urhobo as prestigious, while 13 students disagreed.

These findings suggest that a considerable number of students, particularly females, perceive the study of Urhobo as lacking prestige. This perception may reinforce negative attitudes toward the programme and discourage wider interest or commitment to it as a respected academic pursuit.

Figure 5 presents the responses of DELSU and COEWA students regarding their parents’ attitudes toward their studying Urhobo in tertiary institutions.

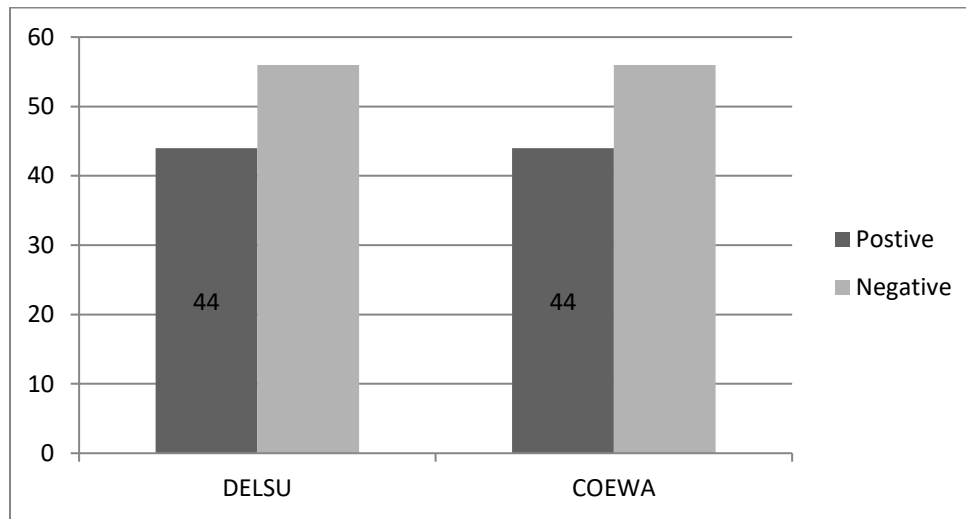


Figure 5: Respondents' perception of parents' attitudes toward the study of Urhobo

At DELSU, 11 out of 25 respondents reported positive parental attitudes, while 14 indicated negative attitudes. Among the positive responses, 7 were females and 4 were males. In contrast, of the 14 negative responses, 13 were females and only 1 was male.

Similarly, at COEWA, 14 students reported that their parents had a positive attitude toward their studying Urhobo. Of these, 11 were females and 3 were males. However, 16 respondents indicated negative parental attitudes, comprising 13 females and 3 males.

Overall, the results suggest that a larger proportion of parents are unsupportive of their children studying Urhobo, particularly in the case of female students. This lack of parental encouragement may further reinforce students' negative perceptions of the programme and contribute to its low prestige and attractiveness as an academic choice.

Discussion of Findings

The study's findings indicate that most students in Delta State tertiary institutions, particularly DELSU and COEWA, only opt to study Urhobo due to failed attempts at gaining admission into their preferred courses. This lack of initial interest often results in poor student quality and limited motivation to engage deeply with the language. These findings align with Adegbija (1994), who argued that people are drawn to languages associated with upward mobility and prestige, attributes not currently linked to Urhobo.

Secondly, the poor employment prospects for Urhobo graduates contribute significantly to students' negative attitudes. Many would prefer to switch to courses perceived as more marketable or prestigious. This reality threatens the future of Urhobo studies in higher education and may contribute to a broader language shift.

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Thirdly, students of Urhobo face several challenges. The study revealed that stigma and lack of prestige are prevalent, leading to low self-esteem among students. In addition, there is a scarcity of written materials in the Urhobo language, with most resources available only in English. This shortfall undermines language development and preservation. Though the Urhobo Studies Association has expressed intent to promote the language, its lack of visible results raises concerns about its effectiveness.

The fourth finding points to the minimal prestige associated with studying Urhobo, driven by societal and institutional neglect. Without positive narratives or visible incentives, the language continues to be undervalued.

Lastly, the study highlights parental disapproval as a significant factor discouraging students. Many parents see no viable career path in studying Urhobo, especially as their children themselves show little commitment to using or promoting the language.

In summary, the study reveals an urgent need for a positive attitudinal shift, among students, institutions, and parents, to safeguard the future of Urhobo in tertiary education.

Conclusion

This study examined students' attitudes toward the Urhobo language in tertiary institutions and uncovered various challenges affecting its development. It found that language attitudes significantly influence learners' willingness to study a language, often depending on the perceived benefits it offers in terms of social and economic mobility. As noted by Adegbija (1994), people are more inclined to associate with languages that offer upward social advancement.

The findings show that Urhobo, as a course, struggles to attract and retain students because it is overshadowed by more prestigious and career-oriented disciplines such as Medicine, Law, Economics, and English. Moreover, the language is taught in only two tertiary institutions, College of Education, Warri (COEWA), and Delta State University, Abraka (DELSU), further limiting its reach and growth.

The study also highlighted that students' generally negative attitudes stem from several issues, including a lack of employment opportunities after graduation and insufficient learning materials written in Urhobo. These factors collectively contribute to the declining interest in the language.

In conclusion, the study affirms that the Urhobo language is at risk of further decline in tertiary institutions due to widespread negative attitudes among students, limited institutional support, and uncertain career prospects. Without urgent intervention, the future of Urhobo in higher education appears bleak.

Recommendations

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The study emphasises that the survival or decline of any language is largely influenced by the attitudes of its speakers. A language cannot thrive without internal motivation from its own community. Therefore, students of indigenous languages, who play crucial roles in documentation, planning, and development, must take active responsibility for preserving their mother tongue.

To support and sustain the study of the Urhobo language in tertiary institutions, the following measures are recommended:

1. The Delta State government, stakeholders, and NGOs should encourage the writing and publication of books in Urhobo by allocating dedicated funds annually.
2. Government agencies and Urhobo-based organizations should provide scholarships to outstanding Urhobo language students and ensure job opportunities after graduation, complementing the efforts of groups such as *Ukoko r'Emoto*, DELSU, and the Urhobo Progress Union in America.
3. Parents should play a vital role by encouraging their children to study the language and by consistently speaking Urhobo at home. This foundational exposure is critical to shaping students' interest in the language.
4. Students should commit to promoting and preserving the language by working collectively to elevate its status, aiming for it to stand alongside developed Nigerian languages like Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo. Their positive attitude is essential in reversing current negative trends.
5. To strengthen language use, cultural products such as videos, music, and audio-visual materials should be produced in large quantities and made affordable. These tools can help revitalize interest and fluency across generations.
6. DELSU and COEWA should revise their curriculum and teaching methods to encompass the full scope of Urhobo language and culture, including literature, science, religion, art, technology, and biodiversity, ensuring comprehensive academic coverage.
7. Foundational Urhobo texts like the Bible and dictionaries should be updated and republished using standardized orthography, with support from the Delta State government and Urhobo NGOs.

These actions, if faithfully implemented, can significantly change the trajectory of the Urhobo language in higher education and safeguard its future.

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Appendix

Questionnaire on Students' Attitudes toward Studying Urhobo Language

Instructions: Kindly indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements by selecting one of the following options:

- **SA** – Strongly Agree
- **A** – Agree
- **UD** – Undecided
- **D** – Disagree
- **SD** – Strongly Disagree

S/N	Question	SA	A	UD	D	SD
1	Admission difficulties make students study Urhobo language.					
2	Students studying Urhobo perform better academically than others.					
3	Employment opportunities for students who study Urhobo language are more than others.					
4	Students studying Urhobo would grab any opportunity to change to other departments.					
5	Students studying Urhobo are ashamed to tell people their course of study.					
6	Studying Urhobo is more challenging than other courses.					
7	Graduates of Urhobo language are more respected than others.					
8	I can advise someone else to study Urhobo at the tertiary institution.					
9	I have visions for the development of Urhobo language.					
10	Parents are proud of their children studying Urhobo language.					