

ÓKWU IGBO ÍHE ỌMỤMỤ NKE MBỤ: LESSON 1

by

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(ónye ñkuzị)**

Ìgbo today, has no alphabets of its own. It is written, like English, with 36 Latin alphabets made up of the following eight vowels (nine in some dialects) and 28 consonants:

a	b	ch	d	e	f
g	gb	gh	gw	h	i
ì	j	k	kp	kw	l
m	n	nw	ny	ñ	o
ọ	p	r	s	sh	t
u	ụ	v	w	y	z

The easiest way to master the alphabets is to memorize them the way Igbos do, that is, not in traditional alphabetical order as above, but in the following groups of five characters:

a	b	gb	d	e
f	g	gh	h	i
j	k	l	m	n
ñ	o	ọ	p	kp
r	s	sh	t	u
v	w	y	z	ch
gw	kw	nw	ny	

The latter, as you can see, is indeed easier to memorize than the former. As a matter of fact, it is indicative of one of the well-known characteristics of Igbos. As a people, they often have a peculiar way of doing their things. And they have no one way of doing anything under the sun because their world is a world of dualities rather than absolutes. For example, while it may be convenient to count from one to ten sequentially, they believe that it is sometimes desirable or even preferable to do so in a disjointed fashion, as evidenced by the two groups of alphabets.

Once you have mastered the above 34 characters fairly well, and are able to recite them effortlessly, you will just have to remember the two variant forms of "i" and "u", namely "ì" (with a dot underneath) and "ụ" (also with a dot underneath). The purpose of the dots will be explained later. For now, just know that they distinguish the latter from the former.

Let us now look at the pronunciation of the characters, that is, the way they sound when pronounced by native speakers of the Igbo language. Generally speaking, sounds and letters in Igbo, as in English, do not always correspond; however, there are more consistent spelling patterns in Igbo than in English. In other words, Igbo words are almost always written the way they are pronounced. The following comparison to English vowels and consonants are only rough approximations. The key to an authentic native pronunciation lies in mimicry of a native speaker. Here is the way they sound:

LETTER	VOWELS	ENGLISH EQUIVALENTS	EXAMPLE(S)
a		animal	áka ákwúkwo "handwriting"
e		elephant	ényì "friend"
i		ink	ìte ája "clay pot"
ì		equality	ìbja "to come"

o	oath	ókwu onu "word of mouth"
o	aunt/umbrella	ọkụkọ "chicken"
u	universe	ùdu mmiri "water pot"
u	no exact equivalent	ụdarà "kind of fruit"

CONSONANTS

b	baby or bell	ụbá égo "richness"
gb	no exact equivalent	égbè éluigwe "thunder"
d	day	édemedede "writing"
f	finger	fụlifulị "soft and tender"
g	girl	gámgám "perambulation"
gh	no exact equivalent	íggha mghigha "turn in bed"
h	height	àhụ ényị "kind of fruit"
j	jail	njem "journey"
k	kite	ákụ íkwụ "palm kernel"
l	light	léelè! "see"
m	man	mbára àmà "village square"
n	nail	nà "and"
n	singing	áñàrà "garden egg"
p	prison	pọtọpọtọ "mud"
kp	no exact equivalent	àkpa nseláka "handbag"
r	red	úrè "pride"
s	sand	ọsọ ńdụ "race for life"
sh	shock/sheet	shịshị "six pence"
t	teacher	tógholu "nine"
v	voice	ụvụrụ íshì "brain"
w	week	wèré! "take"
y	year	àyịyà "crawfish"
z	zebra	íze gírìgírì "stampede"
ch	church	úchè óbì "thought"
gw	no exact equivalent	gwámgwámgwám
"conumdrum"		
kw	queen	nkwo "market day"
nw	wine	nwánne "brother/sister"
ny	Russian "no"	nwá nwányị "female child"

If you have Ìgbo parents, Ìgbo brothers and sisters, Ìgbo relatives, Ìgbo friends, or live near Ìgbo native speakers, ask them to pronounce the above alphabets for you. We, as a people, are always approachable and favourably disposed to help learners of our language in any way we can. Please feel free to ask them for help. You will make their day.

In lesson II, we will examine other interesting aspects and peculiarities of the Ìgbo language. In the meantime, memorize the above alphabets and practice pronouncing them as often as you can. Again, thank you for your interest in Ìgbo language and culture, and remember to visit our website again for subsequent lessons.

ASSIGNMENT

If you can, please do the following assignments before our next Ìgbo lesson.

1. What Latin alphabets used in English language do you find missing from the 36 characters used by Ìgbo?
2. How would you abbreviate the following names?
 - a. Nwannebụíhe
 - b. Ọnàbụkò
 - c. Chụkwukèrè

d. Gwámokwu

3. Find out from your Ìgbo parents, brothers, sisters, relatives, and friends the composition, pronunciation, and meaning of the following Ìgbo words:

- a. ényi mmiri
- b. uri ákwùkwọ
- c. ízu ukà
- d. ónye níkùzị
- e. nídi Ìgbo
- f. mmai mmiri
- g. ụlọ mkpọrọ
- h. ézè nwányị
- i. áka àhụ