

IKWERRE LANGUAGE CURRICULUM AT THE PRIMARY SCHOOL LEVEL: AN EXAMINATION

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Abstract

Language play an important role in preparing children for future life as useful members of the society. This paper examines the importance of the child's mother-tongue in his education and self development. Because of the importance of mother tongue in the development of the child, the paper takes a critical look at the Ikwerre curriculum-at (he primary school and argues that, its implementation falls far short of expectation. It concludes with recommendations aimed al ameliorating llic situation.

Introduction

This paper attempts to examine the Ikwerre curriculum at the primary school level, to determine the extent to which it is geared towards fulfilling the goals of the country's educational process.

The language of the child is the mother-tongue. Language is an important vehicle of culture, therefore in the education of the child, care should be taken to acculturate him in the language which serves not only as a medium of communication but also as a means of creating in him awareness of his environment, culture and ethics. This informs the focus of this paper. It is hoped that this attempt would enhance the child's interest in the language and thus help him emotionally grow up and become a balanced individual of society.

The place of language in the education of children cannot be over-emphasized. Onwuchekwa and Nwazuoke (1995), notes that it is through language that children learn the culture and the ethics of the society. Language is important in preparing children to be useful members of the society. It therefore imperative that the formation of any educational policy must give consideration to the important role of language in the life of the child. That way the future of both the child and the nation can be guaranteed. Fafunwa (1991) puts the role of language in the development of both the child and the nation in perspective when he notes that:

No policy on education can appropriately be formulated without first identifying the overall philosophy and objectives of the nation. For Nigeria, to be free and democratic, just and egalitarian, united strong and self-reliant, ... The importance of language in the achievement of these objectives cannot be over-emphasized. If the national objectives are to be achieved, it is in the interest of national unity that we emphasize the importance of language in our educational process.

Who Are the Ikwerre?

But before we delve into, the subject proper we need to know who the Ikwerre are?

The name, Ikwerre refers to a linguistic group numbering about 200,000 (the hundred thousand) by the 1963 census and well over 1,000,000 (1 million) by the present estimate (2006 census) Ikwerre is made up of four closely related Local Government Areas in Rivers State namely, Emohua, Ikwerre, Obio/Akpor and Port I larcourt City Council.

Transportation is relatively easy and available as parts of Ikwerre run through one or more Federal roads, viz Port Harcourt-Owerri road, Aba-Port Harcourt East West road. Land is in abundance, hence it is relatively easy to map out and construct road tracts for economic activities. A few communities in Ikwerre are dominated by the flow of creeks and rivulets, which empty into the Atlantic Ocean, (Wahua, 1999). The vegetation supports large scale subsistence farming, hunting and other forms of agricultural activities based on land. This makes Ikwerre one of the most important food producers of Rivers State.

Hitherto, there has been an eclectic approach to the study of Ikwerre history, but the 1950s witnessed the growing influence of various write-ups on-Ikwerre people. Prior to that period, the Ikwerre ethnic group was grouped and treated as part of Igbo nation. (Jones 1939) Early writers on the people of Southern Nigeria, such as, Armory Talbot (1923), Daryll Forde (1964) and A. G. Leonard (1966) referred and classed Ikwerre people as Igbo. (Argumagu 2006:3).

Traditional history has classified Ikwerre into seven groups called "Ikwerre Essa". They are

Elele, Isiokpo, Rumuji, Emohua, Choba, Aluu Igwuruta and Obio group. This division was recognized by Forde and Jones, (1950) in their ethnographic study of the Igbo and Ibibo speaking peoples of South Eastern Nigeria, it was also in line with this grouping that seven customary Courts were established in Ikwerre during the Colonial administration. These Courts were located at Elele, Isiokpo, Rumuji, Emohua, Choba, Aluu and Obio in Ikwerreland. Agumagu (2006) had given some insight into their traditions of origin. This need not detain us here, we shall turn to the Ikwerre curriculum presently.

Ikwerre Curriculum at the Primary Level

A look at the Ikwerre language curriculum in the primary school reveals that in the first three years, emphasis is on listening imitation (Pronunciation), formation of simple sentences, identification of things in the child's environment, introduction to reading and writing, story-telling as well as rhymes and songs whose levels of complexity depend on the level of the pupil. At the higher levels of primary education, reading, comprehension, composition, culture, etc are emphasized.

At a glance, the curriculum appears good as it touches on many aspects. In practice however, the story is different. In actual fact, the actual teaching of the language in the primary school is an attempt to make the best of a bad situation. As important as the implementation of the curriculum is to the child and the nation it is unfortunate that it has been bedeviled by setbacks. These set backs range from lack of adequate books and materials to the actual teaching of the subject.

English language is accorded so much recognition that people have come to regard access to its as synonymous with access to educational, economic, social, and political advantage. This has affected the indigenous language leading to it being de-emphasized. Parents actually go to the extent of discouraging their children from speaking the Ikwerre language and many would not take their children to schools where the English language is not the sole language of instruction and communication. The result of this is that, it is tantamount to waste of resources to write and publish,, in the Ikwerre language, or in any other Nigerian language. Apart from the fact that authors would not want to "waste their time" on a venture that would yield little compared to publishing in the English language, publishers are equally unwilling to publish in the language due to similar economic consideration. This has a negative effect on the teachers themselves, who now place greater emphasis on the teaching of English and other subjects than the teaching of Ikwerre. In fact, English language appear virtually everyday on the school time-table while Ikwerre appears just twice. The pupils themselves prefer reading materials in English than in Ikwerre. One reason for this is that the quality of reading materials available in Ikwerre language is inferior in production and content than those available in English. Alto (1978) writing on the Yoruba, observed that .the student who has not seen a (Yoruba) textbook of standard equa! to those that he or she uses for other subjects is almost sure to treat the study of (Yoruba) with nonchalance and levity. This, according to him accounts for the lack of interest shown by both teachers and students in the subject. These arguments also apply to the student studying Jkwerre language.

Another serious flaw in the curriculum is, only one Ikwerre text is recommended per class per session. This is grossly inadequate, as it is not enough to sustain the interest of the pupils in the study of the language. Children like to read materials that are of interest to them and it is believed that generous provision of interesting reading materials in Ikwerre especially short stories will stimulate their interest in the study of the language.

It is also evident that audio-visual materials, are seriously lacking or where available, are not effectively used for the teaching of Ikwerre. While the curriculum can be said to be adequate in its cultural content, it is the writer's view that enough emphasis is not placed on ethics such as cleanliness, respect for elders, hardwork, etc. This infact should form the bedrock of the curriculum, for as Dalby (1978) rightly advised, the child should learn to love and respect the mental heritage of his people and the natural and necessary expression of this heritage is language.

One essential part of the Ikwerre curriculum in the primary school should be story telling. The advantages of this cannot be over-emphasized. Apart from being a veritable instrument for acculturation, it serves as training in reading habit. Egwurube (1995) believes that 'ability to listen attentively and to sit down for long hours listening to stories can later be useful to reading'. Children, he says, 'can go from story-telling to story reading". Today, however, it is sad to observe that story-telling no longer enjoys the pride of place it enjoyed in the past in schools and in homes. In some schools, when stories are told it is often in English. Moreover, availability of other means of relaxation such as television, video, and in-door games has dealt a fatal blow on story-telling at home.

Where this is not the case, it could be that because of the economic situation in the country, children spend the time they could have spent in reading and listening to stories in hawking and other economic activities as their own contribution to the family welfare.

Moreover, the present curriculum seems to have neglected the special needs of exceptional children (children with disabilities) in the country's school system. This has adversely affected such pupils as available materials were not designed with them in mind. Moreover, there are few specialist teachers to use the materials in teaching them.

Recommendation

There is no doubt that the study of Ikwerre, and indeed other Nigerian languages in both primary and post primary levels of education is suffering-a serious setback. If the nation's future must be safe guarded, the following steps must be taken to urgently improve the Ikwerre curriculum in primary schools. This would help to lay the solid foundation needed for national development.

- 1 More emphasis should be placed on ethics as this would ensure that the children know the dos and don'ts of the society. Since they are trained to become "leaders of tomorrow", important habits like cleanliness, respect for life and property, respect for elders, honesty, hardwork, etc must be entrenched in the school curriculum and adequately inculcated in the pupils.
- 2 Audio-Visual Materials must be provided to make the study more lively, real and interesting. Radio, television, pictures and real objects should be used in teaching all children.
- 3 Parents should encourage children to read, among others, books and materials written in Ikwerre language. They should also find time to tell stories at home. Parents should from time to time visit schools to see how their children are performing.
- 4 Government and organized private sector should invest money in the publishing of books in the indigenous languages. This would go a long way in encouraging writers in the languages to write as they would be assured not only that their works would be published but that they would have some material rewards from writing in the indigenous language.

Conclusion

• In this paper we attempted to analyze the Ikwerre language curriculum at the primary school level. It is obvious that the Ikwerre orthography had witnessed some advancement as it is now used. In the primary and secondary school levels. However it is hoped that inspite of the problems highlighted in this paper, government and the organized private sector would encourage authors to write more Ikwerre books and in other Nigerian languages. That way the culture and traditions of the people would be inculcated on the younger generation. Thus contributing to the building of a verile and stable society.

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