

LITERACY AND READING IN NIGERIA

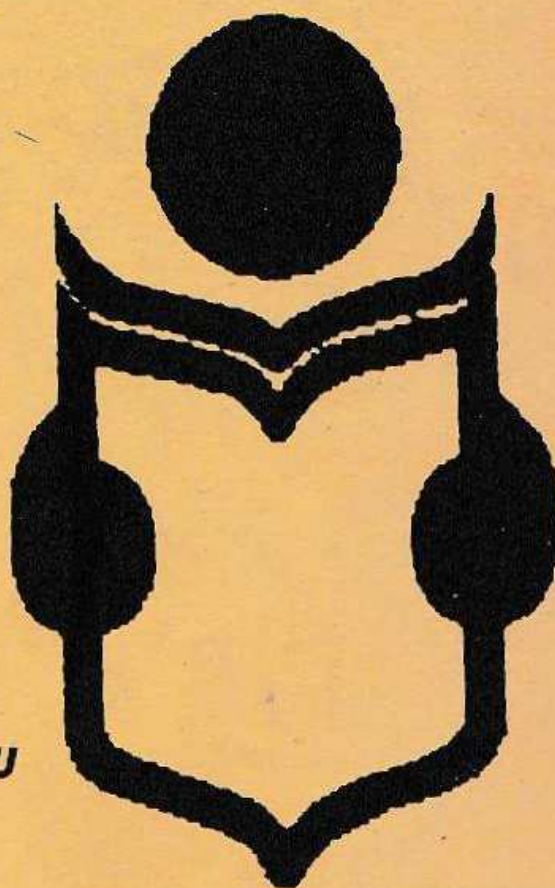
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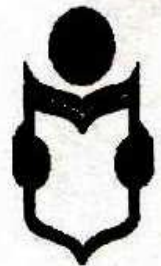


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TEACHING INITIAL READING IN THE MOTHER-TONGUE: A CASE OF IBIBIO

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ABSTRACT

A combination of individual sounds makes up words in any language. The utterance of such words in that language is referred to as "Pronunciation". This pronunciation in any language is the basis of reading. It is therefore very important that it should be introduced properly at the Nursery School level.

The Ibibio language (and its varieties) is spoken in Akwa Ibom State as a first language. This, of course, creates a different situation from the English Language which is spoken as a second language in the same locality. However, learning to read the two languages poses more or less the same problems. How does a child who already speaks Ibibio language fluently at three years reconcile the spoken Ibibio sounds with their graphic representations?

This paper attempts to make a case not only for the introduction of this aspect of reading in Ibibio, but also to put up strategies for the teaching of the initial reading in the Ibibio language using the phonic method.

INTRODUCTION

The main aim of the pre-school or nursery education is socialization. In other words, the child should be directed properly and the base for learning set. Learning is achieved mainly through reading a lot of materials. Instructions and guidance on the articulation of sounds are therefore very necessary since a combination of sound units makes up words. Words lead on to larger units of information transmission.

The Ibibio language is spoken as a first language in the Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. This implies that the average child of school age in this community can communicate very fluently in Ibibio at three years old. This is the minimum age for admission into the nursery schools, which is the focus of this paper.

It is widely agreed that initial reading is best taught in the language which the learner is already fluent in. But the linguistically heterogeneous nature of the Nigerian society makes this difficult. The Ibibio community enjoys such a privilege in that in spite of dialectal variations, members of the state can communicate with one another.

English Language, on the other hand, by virtue of its role as a second language does not enjoy this privilege. Most children at school age begin to use the English Language only after they start school. Even so, the English syllabus in the pre-primary schools in Nigeria emphasizes mainly alphabetical drills and memorization. This implies that the alphabets are first of all introduced to the pupils. Words are then formed from these letters and the pupils are made to memorize them, thus creating a kind of "look-and-say" situation. Researches have shown that this look-and-say method which is so widely used is not very effective. Roberts (1969:32) thinks that this method:

... plays little if any part as an aid to learning to read as such, because it does not help a child to decode unfamiliar words unaided.

The ultimate result is that most of the children who pass through this method end up as non-readers simply because they cannot initially attempt to pronounce new words while others have problems of pronunciation.

There are numerous problems in teaching initial reading, be it in a second language or mother-tongue. The case of English has been treated elsewhere (Udoh, 1989). We are however here concerned with the case of the mother-tongue. The focus as has been mentioned, is on the child who can speak his language well at the beginning of the reading lessons in a language he understands and speaks fluently. How does a child reconcile the spoken language with written symbols?

Many strategies have been put up for teaching initial reading in English. For instance, Doman (1965) is of the view that the letters and pronunciation should precede reading. He describes the sounds as "abstractions". He suggests that the children be introduced directly to certain groups of words starting with parts of the body and going on to other words.

Roberts (1962), puts up 13 sub-skills of reading. These skills start from recognition of letters and then gradually introduce the different sounds starting from single sounds, digraphs and gradually introducing the irregularities in sounds. He emphasizes constant drills to reinforce the familiarity of the students with the sounds.

The Language Experience Approach exploits a child's oral language and experiences which are the bases of learning skills. There are varieties within this approach. For convenience, I shall discuss only one: The Allen's Language Experience. (See RAN Monograph series A, 1985). This approach is based on the experience of the child and the concept that one can talk about his thoughts, write his thoughts and also read what is written. It emphasizes a lot of interaction between teacher and pupil using such aids as learning centres, dictated stories etc.

However, very little has been done in this area of the mother-tongue. Note, however, that the different approaches discussed above have been used and at different times and settings very effectively. The Language Experience Approach has been greatly criticized. The main problem being here that it does not help its users decode unfamiliar words.

The new Phonics Approach, on the other hand, helps its users to decode as many words as possible. As the name suggests, this method operates at the Phonetic level. The important thing here is not the number of spellings a child can recognise but rather, the

number of sounds he can put together and the number of sound combinations found in the different words that the child will come to recognise. In other words, from a finite set of sounds, a child should be able to produce an infinite number of words and later sentences. This Chomskian notion is the main assumption behind this paper. It kind of marries the Language Experience with the Phonics Approach to come up with quite an interesting programme as will be seen shortly. I strongly agree with Abiri (1983:85) when he says:

An eclectic approach to the teaching of Reading is ... essential. A combination of methods that will encourage reading for meaning, promote interest, develop word-recognition skills and help accurate phonic analysis so that correct spelling and the tackling of new words may be facilitated is better than any single method.

Strategies for Teaching Initial Reading In Ibibio

It is important that the child knows from the beginning the nature of the task he is trying to accomplish. There is, therefore, the need to prepare the pupils for the task of Reading. The following pre-reading guide is adopted from Anogiu, 1983.

1. Physical Readiness

Is the child able to see and hear properly?

Can he speak clearly?

Does he seem to have enough vocabulary to express what he wants to say?

Does he have speech defects or problems?

Is he healthy?

2. Mental Readiness

Can he carry out oral instructions?

Can he ask questions?

Can he tell or enjoy stories?

Can he interpret pictures?

Can he arrange and re-arrange pictures, diagrams in a logical sense?

Can he draw, or make symbolic representations?

Can he discriminate and recognize similarities and differences in objects, pictures, words, letters and sounds?

3. Emotional and Social Readiness

- Is he exposed to reading materials at home?
- Is the attitude of the parents conducive to fostering reading in him?
- Can he work independently?
- Is he co-operative with others?
- Is he mature?
- What special traits does he possess?
- Are there parental pressures on him?

4. School Readiness

- Is the school ready for him?
- Is the teacher trained to help the young learner?
- What facilities are available for him?
- Can his progress be measured and assessed?
- What facilities are there to diagnose and help the child with reading problems?

The above questions are merely guidelines to determine the reading readiness of the child. This stage of development of the child is an important one as it can show the teacher where to lay emphasis and when. Note at the outset that the different stages discussed below should not be hurried over. Rather, a lot of time should be spent on each stage, particularly the preparatory stage which should coincide with the children's orientation in the class.

Stage I The Preparatory Stage

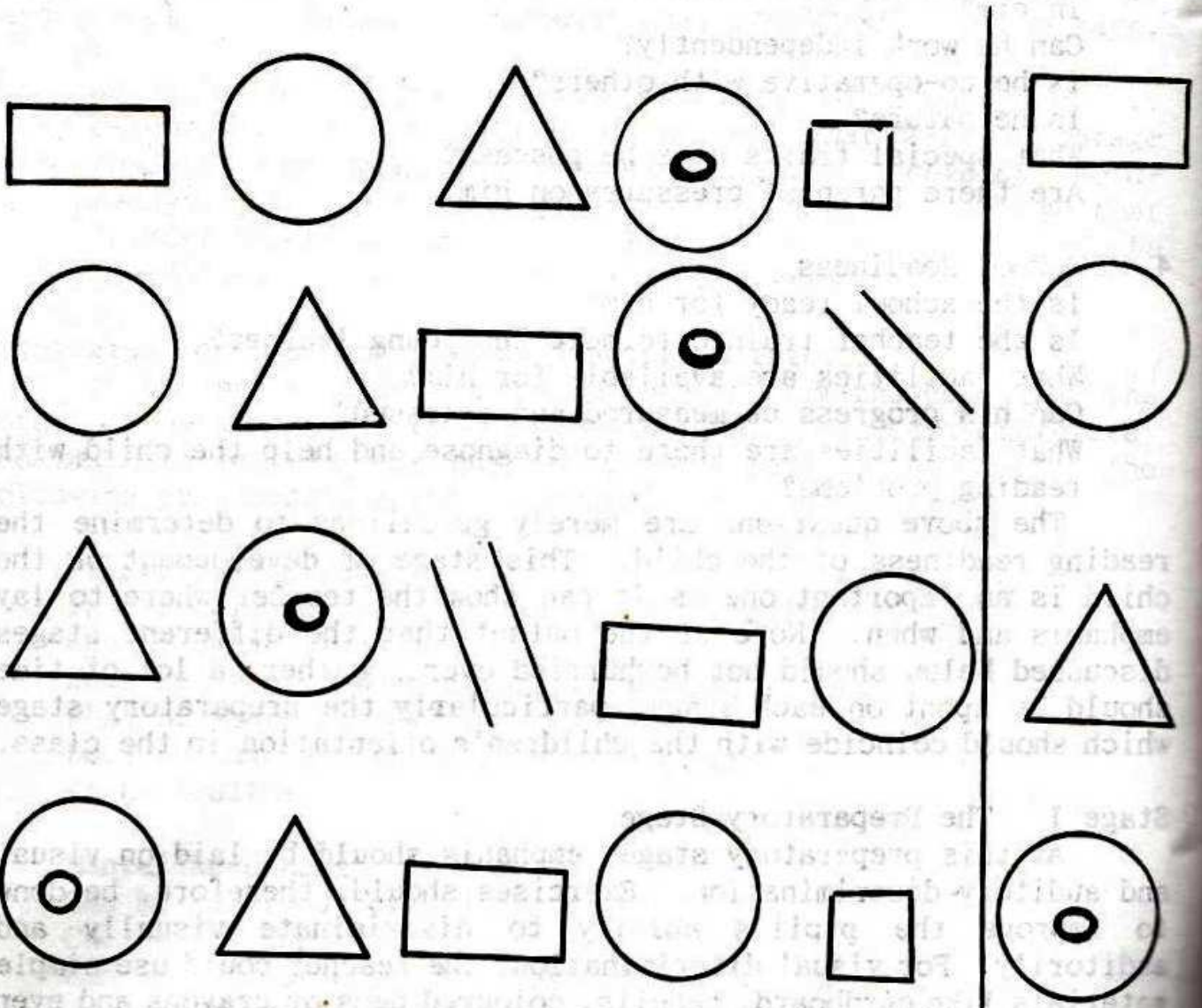
At this preparatory stage, emphasis should be laid on visual and auditory discrimination. Exercises should, therefore, be done to improve the pupil's ability to discriminate visually and auditorily. For visual discrimination, the teacher could use simple materials like cardboard, pencils, coloured pens or crayons and even chalk.

Write out different figures on the blackboard or cardboard and get the children to sort out which of the figures are similar. Sometimes, the same figures could be written with different colours

and the children could be asked to sort out the similar colours. Two of such exercises are given below:

Exercise I

Ask the children to choose the matching figure from the group of figures on the left hand side.



Write out different figures on the blackboard or cardboard and get the children to sort out which of the figures are similar. Sometimes, the same figures could be written with different colours.

Letters of the alphabet could be used for such visual discrimination exercises as shown below:

b	d	p	h		d
a	o	e	u		o
c	a	n	h		h
m	n	y	w		w
f	kp	a	nw		hw
s	d	t	r		r

For more details, see RAN Monograph Series A.

With regard to auditory discrimination, rhyming games and songs should be used very often for they are quite helpful. It is important that the child should be able to discriminate auditorily between the different sounds in Ibibio and with time be able to associate the sounds they hear to their graphic representations. The exercise below is just a guide.

Exercise II

Identify the sound (b) in the following words. The words should be read out by the teacher first and the pupils made to repeat. When they have mastered the pronunciation of the sounds, then they could be asked to say where the said sound occurs.

Initially

[ba]
[baŋ]
[ben]
[bin]
[bon]
[bun]
[bien]

Medially

[aba]
[abe]
[ebe]
[obo]
[ibod]
[ubo]
[eba]

Note that some of the words above are meaningless Ibibio words. They are merely used for this discrimination exercise.

Stage II

With enough exercises on discrimination, the pupils are now ready for the introduction of orthographic letters of Ibibio. It is important that they should recognise the letters whenever they appear. This step, besides familiarizing the pupils with the letters, also helps in visual discrimination, which has been mentioned as very important for the children at this stage. The Ibibio letters presented below are taken from Okon Essien (1983).

a A b d e f gh h i k kp m ɔ n ñ ñw ny o ə p r s t u w y

Exercise III

	Initial	Medial	Final
a	aya aba ami	bad nam sad	eka anwa kpa
A	- - -	baK taT kaK	- - -
b	bed ben bin	ebe eben obu	kpeeb - keeb
d	dep di dip	ada edep ide	bed sed yad
e	eto eno efe	tem men sem	kpe se ye

f	fad	e	e	-
	fak	u	u	-
	fep	i	i	-
gh	-	t	t	-
	-	g	g	-
	-	h	h	-
h	-	f	f	-
	-	s	s	-
	-	b	b	-
i	ino	-	d	di
	mo	-	e	eti
	iso	-	m	mi
k	ke	k	-	-
	ko	s	-	-
	-	t	-	-
kp	kpe	a	-	-
	kpək	e	-	-
	kpa	o	-	-
m	ma	a	nam	nam
	me	i	sam	sam
	mi	e	tem	tem
o	oko	f	to	to
'	oto	k	no	no
	okpo	o	bo	bo
n	no	k	man	man
	nie	e	men	men
	nem	i	ben	ben
ñ	ñke	s	nyeñ	nyeñ
	ñka	k	tañ	tañ
	ñko	t	teñ	teñ
~nw	ñwan	a	-	-
	ñwin	a	-	-
	ñwim	i	-	-
ny	nyam	e	-	-
	nyen	n	-	-
	nyin	i	-	-
o	obu	k	ubo	ubo
	oku	b	owo	owo

	okpo	-	oso
ð	-	kpæk	-
	-	næk	-
	-	tæk	-
p	-	-	kop
	-	-	top
	-	-	dop

Stage III

Next, introduce to the children the corresponding sounds to the different letters which they have already learnt. To aid the children at this stage, a kind of phonological awareness is needed. Phonological awareness simply means awareness of the sounds of the language a child speaks. (Umoh, 1991:23). Being able to learn the sounds that letters represent is very important. If a child knows the sound of a letter, whenever such a letter occurs, he knows what sound it is and he can recognise it whenever it occurs. From there, he can group sounds to form words of his own gradually.

The introduction of these sounds could be split into consonants and vowels. It is easier to articulate and describe consonant sounds by virtue of their articulation. The points of articulation are better defined in consonants than in vowels. In case of vowels, the articulators do not touch and as such a lot of approximation is involved. At this stage, tongue twisters could be very helpful. A few are given below for guidance:

1. Okpok fab ektopad nkim
2. Mkpá fib oyoho uknb oko mfi mma
3. Afia ofon ofon ofon ofion
4. Afid nnyin idia ndidia udua
5. Isobo ka mmoon isobo asin.

Common nouns could also be associated with the different sounds. For instance:

- o - owo
okok
- e - esop
ete
etiañ
- i - inuñ

of this problem sometimes is the ignorance on the part of the teachers handling the pupils for some of them do not know that some materials can enhance their teaching and facilitate learning for the children.

There is also the problem of large classes that are difficult to handle. An efficient and well-trained teacher would be unproductive if he has more pupils than he can cope with. Contact with the pupils is lost and a lot of problems arise from here.

The tendency to point at words just to identify them leads ultimately to the poor reading habit of word pointing at a later stage.

Again there is also the confusion of what type of reading to teach at this initial stage. Is it silent or oral reading? Silent reading at this level is too abstract. On the other hand, oral reading leads to vocalization - a major reading fault.

SOLUTIONS

These problems are prescriptive and are as such subject to modifications to suit both the teacher and the pupils.

It is important to consider here other factors outside the subject. Time-table planning comes in here. Such uninteresting, rather abstract aspect of Language should be fixed for the morning hours when the children are still eager and fresh from home.

Lessons on initial reading should not last longer than ten minutes. It should stop just before the pupils get bored, to be continued next lesson.

Nursery I Class should concentrate on the preparatory stage I discussed above. Nursery II should concentrate first on the learning of the letters and later their corresponding sounds. The Transition Class should move on to combining the sounds to form single syllable words and recognizing the sounds when seen in words (Stage II above).

Continuity between the home, the school, the community is very important in children's training generally. Parents should have an idea of what their children do in school and try to reinforce at home what they (the children) have been taught in school. Whatever method that the teacher adopts in school can be revised. If a different method is used, it should be done in such a way as to

avoid confusing the children.

Perhaps the best advice should be that the teacher should try to be a little flexible in dealing with the children generally. It is important that they bear in mind that the easiest way the pupils can learn to read is through constant practice with sounds and ultimately words. Roberts (1962) sums it up very appropriately:

It is only by examining words, constructing words; examining their parts, building new words, using words, that the children can truly and effectively learn to read.

CONCLUSION

Teaching Initial Reading may be a bit abstract, but each teacher should try to make his class as interesting as possible. In some lessons, some pupils can even be promoted to the level of a teacher for the lesson. Such 'teachers' should be subjected to occasional criticisms from the other pupils and very good ones praised or even rewarded.

If the above stages are followed in teaching Initial Reading in the Nursery School, children would be able to read Ibibio as fluently as they speak it in Primary I.

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