

Isoko Folktales as Catalysts for Language Teaching/Learning

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Abstract

Minority languages show shifting age profile of language use to more powerful regional, national or global languages. This shift can be rapid over a generation or two, or it can take place gradually through a period of unstable bilingualism or multilingualism. It becomes a challenge if it results in language endangerment which is a serious socio-cultural problem in several world communities today. Language is important to transmit culture. Folktales are part of oral traditions which are used to pass on social values to the younger ones. They play crucial parts in keeping culture alive, yet the oral tradition of moon-light stories has disappeared. The Isoko language is not in use as it ought to be, having been gradually replaced by the Warri-based pidgin. This paper therefore, looks at Isoko folktales as a vehicle for the teaching/learning of the Isoko language. The theoretical framework is hinged on Muller, Malinowski and Maanem's concepts of ethnographic theory and the theory of language teaching/learning.

Keywords: Language endangerment, oral traditions, folktales, language teaching/learning.

Introduction

It is wise to note that an endangered language is a language that is terribly at the risk of disuse. That is, such a language is in decline as its speakers shift to speaking another language. The

status of English has brought about the decline of the use of our indigenous languages. Darah (1988:3) laments this situation when he states:

All the nationalities that make up or portray Nigeria had thriving traditions of literature before they came in contact with Arabic and European influences. Today, most of these traditions, like the human communities that created them, have declined. This state of cultural depression is a consequence of the conquest of Nigeria by British colonialism in collaboration with Christian and Islamic religion.

Mowarin (2007:233) ran a study on language endangerment in Isoko land. He says, that the fact that, a substantial number of the world's languages are shrinking and grappling with survival cannot be over-emphasized. Wurn (2012:14) in Mowarin (2007:238) segments the gradual process of language endangerment into five (5) stages. The first is a decrease in the use of the language by children said to be potentially endangered. The second is when the youth are experiencing a decrease in the use of language. The third is when the competent speakers are fifty (50) years of age. The fourth is when the few remaining aged speakers reduce, due to old age and death; the language is said to be extinct. The forth is when the last speakers die – the language is said to be moribund.

Various scholars (Bradley and Bradley, 2002:xi); Linden (1991); Igwebuike and Ajiboye (2014) Dorin (1980); Fishman (1991) have estimated that up to ninety percent (90%) of the world's languages will disappear in the during 21st century. The role of indigenous languages in National Development is enormous. That is why Ayodele (2013:16) says:

Indigenous languages are indispensable cultural legacies, without which all forms of human

interactions cannot be carried out. there are however some challenges in the optimum utilisation of these mother tongues. The major problems being orthographic inadequacy, the multiplicity of minority languages, linguistics desertification and language undergarment.

Nevertheless, there is a wind of radical research in our contemporary society to revitalize the dying languages in Nigeria. The West African Language Congress (WALC) is a testimony to this initiative. Between July 31st – August 2nd, 2013, the aforementioned congress in conjunction with the 36th conference of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria (LAN) organised a conference on the theme; Research Documentation and Sustainability in the Development of West African Languages. This theme is aromatic of post colonial consciousness of cultural nationalism and linguistic revivalism. Also, the government has made efforts to revitalize the three major language groups in Nigeria. The New National Policy on Education (1977) whose Article 8 reveals:

In addition to appreciating the importance of language in the educational process as a means of preserving the people's culture, the government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his tongue. Language learning has been the interest of society.

Oral Traditions

Oral traditions are varieties of spoken forms including riddles, proverbs, tales, nursery rhymes, myths, legends, songs, poems, chants, dramatic performances, folktales and more. They are used to pass on knowledge, cultural and social values to people. Passed on by words of mouth, they are crucial to survival of culture. They differ from genre to genre, context to context and

from performer to performer. These attributes make them vibrant and colourful forms of oral expressions. They are very fragile as their viabilities depend on an uninterrupted chain, passing traditions from one generation of performers to the next. Therefore, if a language is at an endangered state, it inevitably leads to the loss of oral traditions and expressions. Austin (2008:2) talking about oral tradition says:

The Elders would serve as mnemonic pegs to each other. They will be speaking individually uninterrupted in a circle one after another. When each Elder spoke they were conscious that other Elders would serve as 'peer reviewer' [and so] they did not delve into subject matter that would be questionable.

Alagoa (1996), Zainab (1994), Mowarin (2007) see a common feature that pervades most endangered languages in the world; the fact that, they are mainly small languages used for communication mainly in the oral medium. One is of opinion that, this might be the reason why the elderly are mostly the custodians of this orality.

Emenajo (2010:51-58) emphasized that, every language that has less than 100,000 speakers is endangered. How many languages in Nigeria are thus endangered? The Isoko language under study is not fully taught in all the schools in Isoko South and North of Delta State, Nigeria. There are pidgin-English classes even in Isoko churches during sermons, and it is not strangers that are there but indigenous Isoko people. Language is the vehicle for transmission of culture. An endangered language affects the general cultural sensibilities of a people. The oral art forms of the people are orally composed, orally transmitted and orally realised in the indigenous languages. If the orality is not sustained and nothing is done about it, then, the language endangerment is facilitated. One language dies every fourteen (14) days. (Russ 2012:1). The vast majority of the speakers of

endangered languages consider the loss of their oral traditions as a vital break with their cultural identity and tradition and many work actively to counteract the impending loss of oral traditions and work closely with Linguists in revitalisation projects.

Folktales/Folklores

Williams Thomas (1846) is generally credited with coining the term 'folklore'. These are stories passed down through generations. Different kinds of folktales include fairy tales, tall tales, trickster tales exist. Folktales refer to those products of the human spirit created outside the written records and kept alive by oral transmission.

The idea of folklore as an academic discipline with theoretical approach of its own is of recent origin, though folklore itself is as old as the folks all over the world-(Dorson, 1972:40). Whether we live in remote areas or in urban centers, folklore pervades our lives; we all tell stories. However, some forms of folklores are only performed at specific times, events and places. These types are the concern of this study. They form part of an oral tradition. Their forms are:

- Setting:** The place is described easily and briefly to fit the typical geography of the culture. Time could be the past (usually long ago), fantasy time (once upon a time, place, or long ago).
- Plot:** Very simple, though interesting, thought provoking to didactic, full of action, following specific and simple patterns.
- Theme:** Usually universal truths, lessons and values related to people. Their actions and or material are valued by the group that creates the folktales. Often the tales tell what happen to those who do not obey the groups' tradition.
- Tone:** Good versus bad/evil, a reflection of human strength, frailties, weaknesses or imperfection. (Encyclopaedia Americana, 1829; Vol. II)

Audience is a key factor in folktales. In the African context of oral traditions in folktales, the place of the audience is very unique. Rice (1959:50) points out that the second and final stage of any work of art is 'communication' which is sharing of the art object with others. And Finnegan (2012:10) is most emphatic to this point when she says: "the fundamental act of the theatre (oral performance) occurs whenever a player or impersonator communicates directly by act or word to an audience or observers". Robert and Owen (1995:189) continue that; first 'folklore enables human beings to escape in fantasy from repressions imposed upon them by society'. To them, it reveals man's attempts to escape in fantasy from the conditions of his geographical environment and from his own biological limitations as a member of the genus and species *Homo-Sapiens*. Then, second to them folklore validates culture 'justifying its rituals and institutions to those who perform.

Language Teaching/Learning

Teaching is 'showing or helping someone to learn how to do something; giving instructions, guiding in the study of something, providing with knowledge or causing to know or understand'. Teaching involves conscious efforts aimed at imparting knowledge, while learning is conscious effort aimed at acquiring knowledge, she further states that; language teaching and learning are seen as conscious efforts made by teachers to impart or transfer knowledge about language to learners and conscious efforts made by learners to learn the language (Imoniverha, 2012:77). There are many definitions of language teaching and learning as there are experts and linguists. Language teaching and learning are two concepts taken up together because of their interdependence; learning depends on teaching which in turns depends on learning. Learning and teaching share some characteristics together. Each of them is a formal exercise. That is why there is an agreed period, place and manner of contact (teaching-learning situation). Williams (1990:19) says

that; 'learning facts about a language is not learning that language, and language is not a matter of learning facts'. He continues that in learning a language, it is not just the ability to make a sentence that matters but the use to which that ability is put. He concludes that a skill in itself is a tool. What he means is that, to learn a language is to acquire skill(s).

One agrees with Williams, for instance, in English language we learn sounds, it does not end there, the ability to articulate these sounds in speech properly becomes a skill. In agreement with the skill issue, Azikiwe (2007:15) says that, 'the language teacher should present tasks and use materials within the level of skill and abilities of the learner. And when they make mistakes, it should be corrected with clear and careful explanations since it is obvious that no learner deliberately makes mistakes'. Corder (1996) in Atonuje (2012:10) dichotomized between error (a failure in competence, a systematic fault) and mistake (a flaw in performance). We make mistakes or commit errors of one sort or another. These mistakes according to Corder in linguistic performance do not reflect in our knowledge of the language (competence).

George (1996) talks about language teacher/learner interaction, that in this type of interaction, 'the learner experiences the benefits of both receiving input (hearing) and producing output (speaking)'; that, the opportunity to produce comprehensible output in meaningful interaction is another important element in the learner's language development of ability. This same view is expressed by Knowles (1983) in Derrick and Ecclestone (2008:21) who call it 'dialogue between teacher and learners' – they posit that dialogue in language teaching and learning is practical and exposes and utilizes accumulated experience and knowledge for the benefit of everyone in the group. They say that; it is through dialogue with learners that teacher can discover how to differentiate the learning programme to meet the diversity of needs among the learners.

Theoretical Framework

Muller (1733) Malinowski (1914) Coleman and Simpson (2004) are pioneers of the ethnographical theory. Ethnography is the study of people and culture. It is derived from the Greek word 'ethnos' meaning folk, people, nation and the Greek word 'grapho' meaning 'I write' or 'field of study'. It is a means to represent graphically and in writing the culture of a group. The resulting field study or a case report reflects the knowledge and the system of meanings in the lives of a cultural group.

The field of ethnography became very popular in the 19th century as many social scientist gained interest in studying modern society. Muller (1733) developed the concept of ethnography as a separate discipline (from Anthropology) whilst participating in the second Kamchatka Expedition as a Professor of history and geography. He differentiated *Volker-Beschreibung* as a distinct area of study. This became known as 'ethnography'. Malinowski (1914) stated that a researcher should be engrossed with the work for long periods in the field and do participant observation by living with the informants and experiencing their ways of life. He gives the view point of the native, and this became the origin of field work and field methods. He applied it practically and travelled to Trobriand Island, located off the Eastern coast of New Guinea – he was interested in learning the language of the Islanders and stayed there for a long time doing fieldwork. Maanem (1988) talks about the third person's perspective by getting the data from the members on the site. The ethnographer stays as omniscient correspondent of actualities out of sight. The features of ethnographic research amongst others is that, the researcher looks for patterns of the group's mental activities, their ideas and beliefs expressed through language or other activities and how they behave in their groups as expressed through their actions that the researcher observed. He gathers what is available, normal, what the people say and their work.

Procedures

The procedures amongst others are to:

- determine if it is the most appropriate design and if it is suitable. If the needs are to describe how a cultural group works and to explore their beliefs, language, behaviour and issues faced by the group.
- Identify and locate a culture-sharing group to study-his members have been together for a long period of time-having shared language, behaviour and attitudes.
- Then collect information in the context or setting where the group works or lives (field work).
- From the many sources collected, analyse the data for description of the culture
- Forge a working set of rules or generalisation on how the culture-sharing group works.

Data Collection Method

Data collection methods are meant to capture the social meanings and ordinary activities of the people (informatants) in naturally occurring settings referred to as 'the field'.

- Interviewers are often taped and later transcribed and all information available used for full analysis.
- Traditionally, the ethnographers focus attention on a community, selecting knowledgeable informants who know the activities of the community well.

This ethnographic method is used across disciplines by mostly anthropologists, sociologists and educationists.

Data Collection and Analysis

For this study, qualitative data (interviews) were used to find out the state of the oral tradition of the Isoko folktales. Five respondents were interviewed from each community of the study. The people who were interviewed were drawn from the

elderly, middle age and the young ones. They were recommended from the leadership of the community – the ‘Ovie’ king, the ‘Odilogbo’ great leader or their representatives.

Question 1: Do you speak Isoko language fluently?

Question 2: What has happened to the moonlight stories of Isoko folktales? Do we still have them? If no, why?

Question3: Can you mention some of the stories. Do they have any addition to human existence? Do they teach anything good?

Question 4: Can the stories help the younger ones, learn the Isoko language?

Interview Findings

Everyone interviewed stated the fact that, the oral tradition of the Isoko folktales is highly endangered. They expressed the implications – lost of values, morals, unity, language use wisdom, love and integrity. They agree that, the tales prepare young people for life through their deductive nature. The stories they say serves as handover tools; used to give generations the beliefs, customs, traditions and language use of the community. Interviewees mentioned the animals and birds as given human attributes in folktales. Animals talking, singing or doing other things like humans – ‘how the tortoise married the king’s daughter, the cricket swimming with a lump of sand; the money tree, the tortoise wittingly subduing the king, the soldier ant that deceived the dog; the child that was roasted for the yam to eat and so on’. They agreed that, if the tales are introduced into the school system, they can be used to boast language teaching/learning. On the other hand, language consultants (informants) were used to collect data of folktales and stories from communities in Isoko South and Isoko North. The tales were transcribed from Isoko language to English. For an example:

Folktale (Isoko Version): Ike edhere

Itaye!

Iye!

Oni omo te yiẹ imọ. Ojọ Edheruru, ojọ Enakpode. Edheruru nyọ ayi, Enakpode nyọ ọzare. Ipanọ a rọ ta emi na, ayi na ti diho, o te yiẹ. O te kpe irau se, a nọ ọ re ri arau ho. O te kpe iyeri ro se, a nọ ọ rẹ ria ha. Whọ wha ayi mẹ nọ yiẹ ọbọ na, kọ eme whọ rẹ ria? A nọ ike. Kọ ike vẹ? A nọ ike edhere. Ike edhere whọ re ria? A nọ eeh! Ozae na tọlọ ewhunu riẹ họ akoko, o te whọlọ ruẹ ẹvbọ. O nya, ọ te ruẹ ike edhere. Ipanọ ọ rọ tọlọ ike, o tẹ jẹ bẹ. O tọlọ ike edhere na jọ ọ te kpo. O tẹ rihọ ike na rọ kẹ ayi riẹ na. Ayi na nọ ehen! Ozae mẹ whọ riẹ ru ziezi. A nọ ikẹ edhere ọvụ mẹ rẹ ria. A nọ ike edhere na vbiri kẹhẹ.

Ayi na tẹ vuẹ nọ, odẹ whọ re zihe, nyi guọlọ ike edhere ifa zi. Ozae na tẹ ghine nya, ọ tẹ tọlọ ifa zi. Ayi na nọ ike edhere vbiri kẹ hẹ. O rọ ẹdẹ avisa, o je ti te obe, kpaki nyọ edhere riẹ nọ a tọlọ ike nọ ike riẹ nọ. Edhere tẹ kpahị eta họ. Ipanọ ozae rọ dhe ọbọ unu na re ọ tọlọ ike na, edhere n ate gbe ako hiẹ. O te bi sie kpoho ivao unu na. O bi sie vrẹ na nyọ o bi ta nọ edhere ayi mẹ yiẹ. O tẹ bi sù ole:

Afige iye
Iye iye iye
Afige iye
Iye iye iye
Ayị mẹ hiẹ ọmọ iye
Iye iye iye
Me kpe irau ke iye
Iye iye iye
A nọ ọ rẹ ria ha iye
Iye iye iye
A nọ ọ rẹ ria ha iya

Iye iye iye
Ki die whọ rẹ ria iye
Iye iye iye
Ike re edhere mẹ rẹ ria iye
Iye iye iye
Ike dhere vbịrị rọ iye
Iye iye iye

Ahwo tẹ tị dhẹ zi. A ri hi edhere gbe akọ hiẹ uvbo. O bi sie kpohọ ubọ unu. O te fi evbẹ họ. A jẹ hẹrẹ ibe no, a tẹ bi nọ nọ keme sọ riẹ nọ o je kpohọ unu edhere? A te bi ta, 'Ayị riẹ ọ rẹ rị arau ho ọ rẹ rị eri hi, ike edhere ọvụ o rẹ ria. Ozaẹ ne bi ha nya kpohọ ubọ evbo na bi riho ike edhere. O nya esievu, gbe isiave no. O ro avisa na, edhere na je gbe ako hie uvbo na'. U tẹ whe emi zi. A te bi ti họtị. Ọkpako oza tẹ bi ta nọ wha họtị hi. Nọ, awhọ je ti te uvbou, ko iku ọmọfa no a re ogwu gbe. Wha hori hi, keme ohwo na whu no, o gbe ti te uvbou ho.

Wha sib a, wha je ti kpe ọmọfa
Itaye!
Iye!

Uwurhe

1. Ma wurhẹ nọ oware nọ ohwo wụ oda ẹrụ
2. Ma wurhẹ nọ whọ nya uwho nọ o rẹ wha uwhu se owhẹ hẹ

Folktale (English Version): The Eggs of a Crocodile

Once upon a time, a woman gave birth to two children. She called the first child who was a female Edheruru, while the second child who was a male was named Enakpode. Enakpode grew up to be a very strong and handsome man in the village. He got married to a very beautiful woman. Within a short period of time, his wife became pregnant and gave birth to a male child. Enakpode was very happy. He picked his gun and

went to the forest to hunt. He returned home with a big antelope and prepared a sumptuous meal with the antelope, she was not interested in eating meat. The husband then brought a meal with Fresh Fish but his wife rejected them. He asked his wife what she wanted and she told him, she wanted eggs, "What kind of eggs", asked Enakpode. She said, she wanted the eggs of a crocodile. So Enakpode picked his gun and went into the forest in search of eggs of a crocodile. He saw the eggs of a crocodile inside a hole in a pond but he was afraid to pick them. After a moment of deep thought, he summoned courage and picked some, hurried home and gave them to his wife who boiled them and ate. She told her husband that the eggs were so sweet, that he should go for more the next day.

Enakpode went the following day and picked more eggs. His wife boiled them and ate. She told him to go for more the next day. Meanwhile, the crocodile had noticed that its eggs were reducing; as a result, it set a trap for the individual that was stealing its eggs. As Enakpode entered the pond and headed towards the hole where the eggs were, the crocodile caught its legs with its sharp teeth and began to drag him into the hole. He screamed and tried to explain to the crocodile that it was his wife who gave birth that sent him, but the crocodile did not listen to his explanation. As the crocodile was dragging Enakpode into its hole, he burst into a song:

Afige iye
Iye iye iye (x 2)
My wife gave birth to a child iye
Iye iye iye
I gave her meat to eat iye
Iye iye iye
She said she will not eat meat iye
Iye iye iye
I gave her fish to eat iye
Iye iye iye
She said she will not eat fish iye

Iye iye iye
What will you eat iye
Iye iye iye
The eggs of a crocodile will I eat iye
Iye iye iye
The eggs of a crocodile are so sweet iye
Iye iye iye

In a moment, his voice was heard no more. The people of the village who heard his screaming ran to the place and saw that a crocodile had caught him in the leg and had dragged him into its hole. Some of them began to question why Enakpode should go to the hole of a crocodile to pick eggs. The others said, it was his wife that sent him. The wife rejected the meat and the fish that he gave her and that it was the eggs of a crocodile she preferred. They said he had gone the first time and the second time; and this was the third time. While some blamed the wife for sending her husband on such a dangerous errand, the others blamed Enakpode for allowing himself to go on such errands. The argument was almost resulting to blows when an old man in their midst advised them to stop the quarrel. He said Enakpode had just died, if this quarrel continued, they might lose another fellow.

Moral Lessons

1. We learn that we should be satisfied with what we have or are given.
2. We should not undertake risky journeys.

Data Analysis

Story: Ike edhere (The Eggs of a Crocodile)

Ụtẹrụvịo	Objective
Nọ uvburẹ na u te kuhọ nọ, ịmọ na i re ti vuhumu ẹvbẹvbariẹ imi ole na, avọ uwthurẹ nọ iku na idhesẹ	At the end of the lesson, the students should be able to identify the repetition device of the language of the song

	and the moral lesson of the story
Emuhọ	Introduction
Ovbure na ọ zọhọ usia na ke ịmọ na	The teacher narrates the story to the students
Ụvbọ Ọsusuọ	Step 1
Ovbure na ota ke ịmọ na epanọ edhere ore ruẹ nọ ote vi ike họ ị ore no ovia na ha	The teacher tells the students about the behaviour of crocodiles when they lay eggs: they are always close by.
Ụvbọ avive	Step II
Ovbure na ọ sụ ole usia na re ịmọ na a za ụza ole na ove jẹ ta ke ịmọ in kpa họ ewẹwariẹ ole na	The teacher sings the song of the story while the students respond with the chorus. She highlights the repetition device of the language of the song for emphasis
Ụvbọ avesa	Step III
Ovbure na ọta ke ịmọ na epanọ Enakpode ọrọ ruẹ uye obọ edhere na, epanọ usia na ọta	The teacher highlights the reason why Enakpode suffered the attack of the crocodile according to the story
Oto okie	Evaluation
Ovbure na onọ ịmọ na kpahọ owarenọ (1) ẹvbẹvbariẹ ịmị ole na odhesẹ (2) avọ owarenọ avwurẹ nọ usia na ze	The teacher asks the students to; (1) Tell what the repetition device of the language of the song means (2) Tell what they learnt from the story (moral lesson)
Eware nọ erọ e bọdo	B/B Summary
(1) Edhere orẹ jọ kele oria nọ ovi ekeriẹ họ (2) Evbevbari ole usia na	(1) The crocodile stays close to anywhere it lays its eggs (2) The repetition device of

ogiese erotavuo imi ole na (3) Ma wurhe no oware no ohwo wuo oda eru (4) Ma wurhe no who nya uwho no o re wha uwhu se owhe he	the language of the song of the story is for emphasis (3) We learnt that we should be satisfied with what we have or are given (4) We should not go on errands that kill
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Conclusion

Language endangerment/extinction is a serious world issue that has attracted attention from various language scholars. It is obvious that many minority world languages are gone and are going into extinction. This language issue is same with the minority languages of our great nation Nigeria and Delta State where the Isoko language of this study is from. The oral tradition of folktales, didactic in nature, from old, has been a means of transferring cultural values, norms and beliefs. It plays an indispensable role for training youths. As presented in this study, the Isoko folktales can be used as catalysts for the language teaching and learning.

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