Learn to Read Hmong

Kawm Nyeem Ntawv Hmoob

Hmong Literacy Development Materials

Instructor's Guide

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Some materials in this guide have been adapted from or reprinted from the website of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (www.sil.org), a pioneering force in the development of literacy, simple materials, community-level programs for non-literate peoples all over the world.

Audience

This primer and reader series are developed for use by Hmong-speaking children and adults (age 8 and above) who have already learned to read another alphabetic language (English, French, Lao, and so on). It could be used with non-literate students, but the instructor would have to develop each lesson more fully and spend more time on developing phonemic awareness and recognition of Roman letters. The questions and guide materials are written in English, since the instructors are likely to be educated in English and literate in Hmong.

The materials can also be used for teaching non-Hmong speakers to read and write Hmong. However, in addition to devoting ample time to the auditory discrimination of tones and sounds not present in English, the program will have to develop vocabulary comprehension as students learn to read words.

This experience is valuable for English-speaking teachers working with Hmong children. It's easier to make decisions about instruction of Hmong children in English after one has struggled to learn Hmong.

These materials can be downloaded and printed from any computer and reproduced on any copy machine. In this way, a teacher can provide the materials for teaching a class without huge financial backing. Classes can take place in family groups, churches, apartment buildings, community centers.... or Hmong university students can take the materials into remote villages in Thailand or Laos to teach literacy.

The Summer Institute of Linguistics in Dallas, Texas, prepares linguists to go into villages all over the world to develop mother tongue literacy programs that use low-cost materials. Their experience abroad can be captured for use in America as well.

Decide on the type of program you can offer:

- •Teach English-literate Hmong children and adolescents to read and write Hmong.
- •Teach Hmong unschooled adults to read and write Hmong.
- •Teach non-Hmong speaking adults the Hmong language.

Identify students who can learn in the same group. Group students by prior educational experience, and if possible, age, gender, and interests.

Find a place and set a time.

Start small and build on success. There are no experts. Learn from mistakes and make things better.

Be realistic. An enthusiastic 11-year old who has gone to American schools can learn this new code in about six weeks. However, reading with fluency requires hours of practice. An adult who has never gone to school will take a year or more to learn the basic decoding and encoding principles.

Be creative. Develop materials to read. Develop and discover reasons to write. Share what you and your students develop with other programs in other places.

Develop new leveled stories. Send stories and other materials to Judy Lewis at the Southeast Asia Community Resource Center for posting on the internet. Gradually, there will be more to read.

Document progress. The easiest and most effective way is to videotape a person reading the same passage at the beginning and end of the program.

Share your success. Show a video clip of the progress of students and the activity in class. Let the media know about your efforts. Build relationships with public schools, churches, and colleges.

Samples:

Goal: To increase the number of Hmong adults who can read Hmong.

Objective: At the end of 100 hours of instruction, students will be able to correctly read, write, and understand Hmong words that begin with single or double consonants in phrases or sentences.

Goal: To teach Hmong youth to read and write their own language.

Objective: At the end of 12-weeks of 3-hour Saturday classes, students will be able to read and answer questions about a story written at Level 15.

Goal: To teach English-speaking teachers how to decode and encode the Hmong language.

Objective: At the end of 45 hours of instruction and practice, students will be able to decode and encode Hmong consonant and vowel phonemes with accuracy, and will be able to distinguish correctly three of the seven tones.

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Timeline

Set a definite number of classes in each session. For example, the fall class might be fifteen 90-minute lessons.

Set the dates for classes.

Describe what students should be able to do at the end of the last class. Write or find a passage to use as an “end of course” test before you start the first class. This is your class assessment.

Describe what students should be able to do at the middle class.

Decide what students need to learn at each class to reach the goal middle and ending targets.

Adjust the class objectives as you assess what students actually learn to do during each class.

Post the timeline and the objectives so that everyone knows the destination.

If you have videotape of a student at the beginning and end of a previous class, show that to the new students. Students must have confidence that they too can learn to read and write. They should know that it is fine to take the same class again.

Student expectations

Be clear about how students should behave. For example:

- Come to every class and be on time.
- Be curious, pay attention, and try hard.
- Practice lessons at home.
- Encourage others to learn.
- Write in a journal every day.
- Do better today than you did yesterday.

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Identify the teacher(s)

Most situations will involve volunteer teachers, but finding money to pay the teacher even a small amount will make it easier to count on someone who will finish what has been started.

Find teachers who

- •are approved by respected members of the community
- •are recognized as honest by the community
- •are respected throughout the community
- •speak, read, and write the Hmong language fluently.
- •understand and are committed to the purpose and goals of the literacy program
- •understand and participate in the local culture
- •understand how to teach and keep students learning
- •work well with others.

Assess the teacher's experience and skills in teaching.

- •Has the teacher taught reading before in any language?
- •How does the teacher assess student progress?
- •What is a typical lesson plan for a 1-hour class?
- •What kinds of questions does the teacher ask about what has been read?
- •How does the teacher provide for individual differences?

Manage the program

Watch the teaching and learning. Discuss what you see with the teacher and the students.

If there is more than one teacher, arrange for regular meetings to review progress, identify problems, give each other ideas, and support one another.

Anticipate and solve any problems. Make program adjustments.

Provide materials that the teacher needs.

Encourage the teacher and the students.

Identify and remove obstacles to success.

Write a report summarizing the each class.

- •Students' names, gender, age, prior education.
- •Students' beginning reading and writing skills.
- •Students' ending reading and writing skills.
- •Syllabus (list of classes and what was taught).
- •"End of class" reading sample.
- •Examples of success or impact on students.
- •Suggestions for improving the next class.

Take a picture of each class with the instructor and keep it with the class report.

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Sources of support

There are many agencies that have a great interest in having Hmong able to read and write, but don't have an organized program. If you can provide the students, teachers, and masters for materials, an agency may provide you with the room, materials, or other support. Try these:

- Elementary school parent involvement programs.
- Public school extended day, Saturday, and summer programs.
- Family literacy programs through schools.
- Churches and community groups.
- Cost-sharing among participating students (student fees).
- Welfare-to-work and job preparation programs.

Student outcomes

A fluent reader is one who reads and understands what he or she is reading quickly and with a minimum of effort. A fluent reader:

- has automatic decoding skills
- has good word attack skills
- has built up a vocabulary of sight words
- reads orally smoothly and with expression, and
- self-corrects (recognizes when something doesn't sound right).
- has good comprehension skills

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Instructor's role

These materials need to be taught by a native Hmong speaker. Think of these materials as the skeleton of a literacy program. The teacher will need to provide plenty of background knowledge, other activities, and more text to read. As time goes by, this program can be more fully developed by sharing new readers via the internet.

Instructors should:

- •Prepare for a lesson by finding words that contain the phonemes and by finding Hmong text to read aloud to students.
- •Plan instruction so it keeps students' interest.
- •Plan instruction so students can be successful.
- •Give corrective feedback.
- •Notice successful efforts.
- •Encourage students to produce language.

Using these materials

Any instructor has permission to duplicate these materials free of charge for use in teaching Hmong literacy. However, these materials cannot be used for free to make money.

You can buy a set of original masters to use on a copy machine, or you can use a computer to view the files over the internet and either download them to your own computer for printing or print them directly from the internet.

To buy set of masters, contact the Southeast Asia Community Resource Center, 2460 Cordova Lane, Rancho Cordova CA 95670. (916) 635-6815, SEACRC@ns.net.

To get materials from the internet, go to the Southeast Asia Community Resource Center's website at
http://mills.fcusd.k12.ca.us/ctrsite/index.html
Follow the links to the Hmong Literacy Development Program. You will need Adobe Acrobat Reader 3.0 to open the files. Click on the link that says "pdf files". The primer, readers and guide are all separate files. When you can see the contents of the book, find the "print" command on your computer and print it out.

What other materials will you need?

A reading classroom should have plenty available to read. You will need to collect or make things to read.

Essential: table and chairs, or lap boards; light, heat, water, bathroom; large writing paper, blackboard, or white board; pencils, pencil sharpener, erasers; access to copy machine.

Nice to have: pocket chart; index cards; personal chalkboards or white boards; cloths for erasing; overhead projector; transparencies; photos; paper for making little books; paper for writing and dictation; colored pens or pencils; video camera, VCR and TV; tape recorder; computer and printer; internet connection.

Preprimer

A primer introduces the letters and the sounds. Before using a primer, a student has to have certain skills. A preprimer has not been developed yet. The instructor will need to provide activities to build reading readiness skills. Before a person can begin to learn to read, he or she must be able to:

- Hear a word and recognize that it consists of individual sounds in a sequence (phonemic awareness)
- Take heard words apart into component sounds (phonemes and tones).
- Judge if two words start the same or end the same.
- Remove a phoneme from a word.
- Count phonemes in a word.
- Change phonemes in a word.
- Judge if two words have the same or different tones.
- Identify the tone of a word.
- Pronounce a word with a mid-level (no) tone.
- Pronounce a sequence of consonant and vowel with different tones.
- Rhyme words (matching vowel and tone).
- Blend phonemes together.
- Know the letters (graphemes) by sight and by name.
- Match letters with the appropriate phonemes and vice versa.
- Recognize consonants, vowels, and tones.
- Understand and interpret illustrations; recognize 2-dimensional representations of 3-dimensional objects.
- Discern shapes; recognize upper/lower case letters, letters in different fonts. Write letters.
- Understand some conventions of print.

Primer

The primer provides materials used to teach Hmong reading and writing to beginners. Learners are introduced to the phonemes (sounds) and graphemes (letters). This primer is designed for students who have learned to read English or another alphabetic language already. It has a very regular pattern and emphasizes high frequency words. The sequence is:

- •Simple vowels (a, e, i, o,u, w) and tones.
- •Initials t, l, d, m, p, f, h, k.
- •Diphthongs (ia, ua) and initials s, v, x.
- •Nasal vowels (ee, oo) and initials n, y, z.
- •Diphthongs (ai, au) and initials q, r.
- •Vowel aw and initial c.
- •Initial ts, tx.
- •Nasal initials nk, np, nt, nts, ntx, nc, nr, ny, nq and xy.
- •Aspirated initials dh, kh, ph, th, ch, qh, rh, tsh, txh, pl/plh, hl, hm, hn, hny, ml/hml.
- •Nasal, aspirated initials nch, nkh, nph, npl, nplh, nqh, nrh, nth, ntsh, ntxh.

After using the primer, a learner should be able to:

- •Match sound (phoneme or tone) to the grapheme (letter).
- •Decode (sound out) nonsense and real words.
- •Encode (spell dictated) nonsense and real words.

Native-Hmong speakers will be able to recognize decoded high frequency words and provide their meanings. Non-Hmong-native speakers will learn real words' meanings as they learn to decode them.

Readers

The readers provide practice of words in meaningful text. Each reader is limited to words that contain the sounds learned so far. The high frequency words for each level are identified. The 25 readers correspond to the sequence of lessons in the primer:

Level 1: **Os** (tones and a, e, i, o, u, w)

Level 2: **Tus Tub** (previous plus initial t)

Level 3: **Tus Luj** (plus initial l)

Level 4: **Ob Tug Dev** (plus initial d, m, p)

Level 5: **Kub Mes-es** (plus initial f, h, k)

Level 6: **Miv Xam Sim** (plus ia, ua, s, v, x)

Level 7: **Ob Lub Pobzeb** (plus ee, oo, n, y, z)

Level 8: **Cov Tub, Cov Qav** (plus ai, au, q, r)

Level 9: **Tus Dev Qus, Tus Uablag** (plus aw, c)

Level 10: **Tus Tsov, Tus Nas** (plus ts)

Level 11: **Tus Txivneej, Tus Nab** (plus tx)

Level 12: **Qaib Sib Tog** (plus nk, np)

Level 13: **Cov Ntsaum, Tus Kooj** (plus nt, nts, ntx)

Level 14: **Poj Qaib Ntes Qe Kub** (plus nc, nr)

Level 15: **Tus Dev nyob hauv lub Dabzaub Nyuj** (ny, xy)

Level 16: **Poj Qaib Nquag** (plus nq)

Level 17: **Tus Luav thiab tus Vaubkib** (dh, kh, ph, th)

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Level 18: **Tus Dev thiab nws tus Duab** (plus ch, qh, rh)

Level 19: **Vaubkib thiab ob tug Haumvag** (plus tsh, txh)

Level 20: **Tus Piv thiab tus Uablag** (plus pl, plh)

Level 21: **Tus Hma Hnav Yaj Cev Plaub** (plus hl, hm)

Level 22: **Cua Qaum Teb thiab Lub Hnub** (plus hn, hny)

Level 23: **Ob Kwvtij Hma** (plus ml, hml)

Level 24: **Nquab Nqhis Dej** (nch, nkh, nph, npl, nplh, nqh, nrh, nth)

Level 25: **Qav Tswvyim Ntau** (plus ntsh, ntxh)

Comprehension

Three to five comprehension questions follow each story. The questions are very patterned and focus on reading strategies and skills needed for performance in American classrooms and on standardized tests:

- Strategy: *Which words are difficult to say?*
- Strategy: *Which words are difficult to understand?*
- Comprehension, sequencing: *Retell the story.*
- Inference: *What is the lesson of the story?*
- Application, cross-cultural compare/contrast: *Think of a proverb or story that teaches the same lesson. Think of a different lesson that this story teaches.*
- Application, synthesis, discussion: *How does this apply to you? Has this ever happened to you?*

One approach is to put the questions on cards and let students draw a card before the reading begins. Then after the story, each person provides the answers for his or her question. The instructor can help expand the answers by asking followup questions or providing additional examples for students to use in making comparisons or synthesizing information.

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What are decoding skills?

They are also called word attack skills. They help the reader figure out new words. Once a word is "sounded out," it is matched to an existing word in the reader's memory, and then understood. If the word is not part of the reader's receptive vocabulary, the reader is "word calling," not reading. Decoding skills include:

- •Seeing the component parts of words (vowels, consonants, tones).
- •Blending vowels, consonants, tones into new words.
- •Recognizing syllable patterns; separating a compound word into monosyllabic parts; joining monosyllabic words into familiar word groups or phrases.
- •Recognizing symbols for consonant sounds.
- •Recognizing symbols for vowel sounds.
- •Recognizing symbols for tone.
- •Recognizing capital letters (upper case) and knowing when to use them.
- •Recognizing punctuation and how it affects reading for meaning and expression.
- •Recognizing the use of space to mark word breaks and paragraphs.

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For new instructors

What are fluency skills?

These skills help the reader see larger segments, phrases, and groups of words as wholes. Fluency should be the aim of every reading and writing lesson. It should increase as learners progress from beginning to advanced readers and writers. They gain this skill through practice.

Here are some examples of fluency skills:

- •Immediately recognizing letters and frequent clusters of letters.
- •Learning frequent words by sight.
- •Seeing phrases as chunks of text (this will be easier for native Hmong speakers).
- •Predicting the next words.

What are comprehension skills?

These skills help the reader predict the next word, phrase, or sentence quickly enough to speed recognition. Comprehension skills use context and prior knowledge to make sense of what one reads. Comprehensibility in writing is related to comprehension in reading. Comprehension is influenced by:

- Understanding that reading makes sense.
- Familiarity of the oral language.
- Prior knowledge and experiences.
- Information presented in the text.
- Use of context to assist recognition of words and meaning.

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For new instructors

What are critical reading skills?

Readers understand various relationships of ideas that they read to one another and to other ideas.

Critical reading skills include the abilities to analyze, apply, evaluate, and synthesize what is read.

Examples:

- Identifying parts of a sequence.
- Recognizing or forming questions and expecting answers.
- Recognizing cause and effect, and being able to predict outcomes.
- Recognizing steps in a process, and being able to predict next steps.
- Recognizing comparisons.
- Recognizing generalization and classification into groups.
- Forming opinions about what is read.
- Incorporating new information into existing knowledge.

Activities

Listen to stories with pictures in Hmong, follow the words. Answer comprehension-type questions about the heard story.

Play same and different games with minimal pairs (words that are alike except for one phoneme). Listen to and write dictated minimal pairs. Find two identical words in a group of three. Match two-word groups that have the same tone patterns ("j-j," "v-b," "blank-m," etc.)

Play bingo with sight words or concentration with high frequency words.

Group and regroup of word cards (by initial, vowel, tone, meaning, function, and so on).

Develop group stories together (teacher writes it on the board). Students copy the story and practice reading it.

Recombine already-learned high frequency words into new phrases, sentences, stories.

Translate words, phrases, sentences and other text.

Search for teacher-identified words in a Hmong newspaper article or other Hmong text.

Write in a journal every day (instructor makes short comment in Hmong for students to read).

Oral reading: choral reading (all read together); paired reading (two students or teacher and student read together); rehearsed reading (hear the text many times before reading; practice reading aloud several times).

Listen to tape-recorded story-telling or two people talking; identify recognized words; transcribe parts of the story into written Hmong; translate into English. Do the same with modern Hmong songs (transcribe the lyrics). Write the lyrics on a transparency, and the students sing along with the recording.

Identify members of the family tree. Write people's names and "tekonyms" (kinship names).

Troubleshooting

Cannot blend phonemes together to make a word. (Needs more practice taking words apart into component sounds, changing the initial, vowel, or tone to make new word, etc.)

Cannot encode dictated words. (Needs more practice in hearing the differences between sounds; needs more practice in matching sounds to symbols.)

Doesn't pay attention. (Task may be too difficult; try easier tasks until student is successful, then work up to more difficult material. Task may become tiresome; change activities more frequently; alternate listening, choosing, manipulating, reading, and writing activities. Student may not know teacher's expectations; be clear about expected behavior. Student may not want to study; establish a personal rapport with the student, then find ways for the student to perform successfully; recognize every successful effort; minimize criticism. Make sure student isn't hungry or in discomfort. Stand near the student while teaching. Be quick to notice when student is paying attention.)

Doesn't recognize words learned yesterday. (Hasn't had sufficient practice recognizing word; use flash cards, bingo, concentration, writing to increase the number of exposures to the word. Some kids take 10 exposures, others take 100 times, and some take 500 times.)

Can't decode and pronounce tones; can't encode tones. (Cannot yet hear the differences between tones; needs more auditory discrimination practice. Needs familiar key word for comparing words.)

Can't decode or encode complex initials. (Needs additional practice in hearing differences in minimal pairs that contain the target sound. Looking for patterns in initials may be helpful for older students, for example: "to, tho, nto, ntho," "tse, tshe, ntse, ntshe").

Non-native Hmong speakers cannot grasp meaning of decoded words. (If students do not have oral Hmong skills, they will not be able to recognize what they decode, nor will they be able to see chunks of text. They will need to increase vocabulary and syntax knowledge. Translations from Hmong to English will help.)

Transition Primers

This information is from the website. It was written by linguists who teach literacy in African villages.

The people who are candidates for learning to read and write in the different language or translation projects can be divided into the following two categories:

•Those who have never learned to read–the preliterates

•Those who have already learned to read (mostly through school), but in a language different from their mother tongue–a trade language, or an official language

A decision has to be made regarding which of these to focus on first, and what kind of materials the learners should have, in order to learn to read in their mother tongue.

In many places in Eastern Africa, people have learned to read in a second language, for example, in Swahili (very easy to read because of a consistent alphabet), English, or French. When we think of translations being used ultimately, but also as soon as possible, we must first consider the literates and the semiliterates. They will learn more quickly, and this fact will, in addition, serve as a motivating factor for illiterates.

However, experience has shown that these people expect to be able to read their own language automatically, on the basis of having learned to read another language. In most cases, this does not work, though, and people are frustrated and disappointed if they do not immediately succeed in reading their own language. Our first task is to make people aware of this possible reaction. Learning to read is done only once. But in different languages, symbols have different values, and people will not know the value of these automatically. Although there is no need to reteach p, t, s, l, m, and so forth, all the elements that are new and/or different in their mother tongue must be taught explicitly. This particular need must be presented clearly to the people.

People who have learned to read once in French, English, or Swahili, must be taught, in addition, the value of the specific graphemes of their language and they must have sufficient practice to enable them to read their own language independently.

Composing the lessons of the transition primer

(Working in Africa with non-literate people using low-cost materials and effective methods.)

- •List all the elements that are different from the language in which the people have already learned to read, including those graphemes that are the same but have a different pronunciation. Do not forget the tones. Only those consonants and vowels that have the same spelling and the same pronunciation in the two languages need not be listed.
- •Experience has shown it very advantageous to begin with the lessons teaching the tones, before concentrating on the new vowels and consonants. The idea is to use two keywords (a tonal minimal pair, if possible) to introduce the two tones, then to move into exercises on so-called “nonsense syllables.” Any easy-looking syllable would do for this. I chose na in Lendu, and in a previous language, ba. Even though the functor na exists in Lendu with several tones, the fact that it is used in these exercises means that the “words” and “sentences” have no coherent meaning and the student has nothing to hang on to, apart from pronouncing the syllable on the correct tone. He is thus forced to concentrate on the tone mark. If there were any meaning in these exercises, the student would guess as much as possible and not necessarily learn to concentrate on the symbol used for that tone. Following that, some real examples can be cited of other minimal pairs in the language using the two particular tones that have just been introduced and taught. As much as possible, these should be words containing the letters that are familiar to the people. I have seen how excited people got when they saw that the particular tones they have been taught “in the abstract” were indeed tones that distinguish between words in their language. There is no better way of convincing people of the need for writing tone than by the language itself. In working with it, that which is often at a subconscious level comes slowly to the surface. Instead of a coherent story after that, I feel that it is sufficient to create some closely similar sentences containing some of these minimal pairs. The students will need to read the

words in context, but still need to pay close attention, and they cannot rely on the larger context of the discourse. An advantage of not having to create stories for each lesson is that such a transition primer can be elaborated in a short period of time. To make up for the lack of stories, I did include, in this particular case, a number of proverbs and some folktales at the end of the second booklet.

- After teaching the tones, one could choose to teach the vowels. Since the people need to become aware of where their own language differs from the language in which they have already learned to read, it seems very helpful to introduce the new vowels in contrastive pairs, that is, together with another vowel that is already known to the people. Lessons on vowels (and also consonants) are built up the same way as the tone lessons, that is, the two keywords with the two contrasting vowels followed by "nonsense syllables." This time, all have the same consonant and tone, but alternate the two vowels in order to force people to pay attention to them. Then could follow a section with minimal pairs for those vowels, followed by some short sentences with each of those words, in sets of two.
- In teaching the new consonant symbols, one continues in the same way: in contrastive pairs (or sometimes triplets).
- I, personally, do not feel it necessary to have each lesson in the same format, especially since this booklet is aimed at those who are already literate and have reached a certain standard of education. I would, therefore, include a lesson focusing on grammatical tonal contrasts in the verb system, or on several pronouns that have contrastive tones lexically and, in addition, change their tones in certain grammatical environments, or on a set of words that have a tonal contrast between singular and plural in this particular language. So, apart from listing the letters (graphemes) that have to be taught, one can, in addition, from the start add a short list of other features that one would like to include, so as to make the people aware of them in their reading.

Final remarks

A booklet like the above is, first of all, made to be used in classes, that is, by a teacher instructing a group. However, I also believe that certain people will be able to use it independently and learn to read their mother tongue even though it has no, or hardly any, explicit explanation in French or English.

A transition primer like this is relatively easy to make and could appear early on in a programme, alongside little books containing folktales, and so forth. It can then serve as a motivating factor for others who have not yet learned to read.

Experiences from the field: Composing the lessons of the transition primer

One of the first questions translation teams ask when determining program strategy is: Are there people who are literate or semiliterate in the national language? If so, how can we get them reading in their own language?

In Colombia, the Catholic church has been generally responsible for education of indigenous communities for over 100 years. In most of these communities, there are many people who are literate in Spanish to some degree. Even though the transition back into reading their own language would not appear to be difficult, few have made this "back transition." One reason may be that, orthographically, the vernacular looks so different and difficult. Another may be that the potential reader is only semiliterate, able to recognize letters and to sound out syllables, but unable to read with facility and comprehension.

After looking over the situation in Colombia, it became evident to me that, even in languages where there are minimal orthographic differences between Spanish and the vernacular, something was needed to facilitate and encourage the transfer from Spanish to the mother tongue. I saw the problem more clearly when I visited a large language community in the Vaups. In the Vaups area, there were many adults and young people literate in Spanish, but few who were able to read in their own language. Since Spanish and the Vaups languages use orthographies which are similar, it would seem that a reader of Spanish, who is a Vaups speaker, should need minimal training to transfer his reading skills from Spanish to his own language. I was curious as to why they would not or could not make the transition, as I made my own little survey. Most said that they hesitated because no one had ever shown them how. I knew this was not

the only reason (it could also be lack of motivation or other pressures), but this helped bring into focus the problem and the possible solution. I had been thinking about printing inexpensive, self-teaching booklets to help motivate those who read Spanish to read their own language.

Just before the Desano New Testament went to press, Jim and Marion Miller approached me about reprinting their ABC book so that they could distribute it along with the New Testament. The purpose would be to introduce the letters of the Desano alphabet so Desanos literate in Spanish could make an easy transition into Desano. Since I had been thinking about transition booklets, I suggested that they develop and print a small (10 page) transition booklet, instead of reprinting the ABC book. The transition booklet would be simple, self-teaching, and inexpensive. The Millers were busy getting the New Testament ready for press, so I agreed to help them.

I had already done some research in the area of transition primers, both in Colombia and elsewhere. One article that I found most useful was "transition primers: Spanish to the idiom" by Georgia Hunter (Novalit 5.1, May 1977). With ideas gathered from the article, plus a transition primer by Stephen Levinsohn, a Tucano transition primer we were working on, and my own past experience, I began working with the Miller's language teacher, Eduardo, to develop the transition primer.

Foremost in my thinking was to make each step easy. Eduardo and I had a list of letters used in Desano but not used in Spanish (u, w, and six nasalized vowels), as well as letters that had the same symbol as Spanish but a different quality (r, h /?/, and g /ng/). Jim and Marion gave us a suggested order of introducing these letters and combinations of letters. We also had a pronunciation guide (required in the front of all vernacular publications)

-for letters appearing in the vernacular but not in the national language, and

-for letters which are the same in the national language but represent different sound qualities in the vernacular.

We listed the letters that were represented by the same symbol and had the same sound quality, and encouraged the reader by saying, "Now you can read [the following] words in Desano!" Eduardo chose six picturable words made up of letters listed. Each picture was boxed in with the word below the picture, in both Desano and Spanish.

We then introduced a letter that appears in the Desano alphabet, but not in Spanish, by describing the letter's phonetic character. (This description was taken from the booklet's pronunciation guide.) We again found a few words (four this time) made up of the new letter and other letters previously listed. Eduardo wrote a few phrases for reading practice.

We continued in this way until all letters and sounds, which do not appear in the Spanish alphabet, were introduced.

All instructions were written in Spanish; however, it was hoped that each step was simple enough that even semiliterates could teach themselves by using the pictures. The last two pages contained a motivational story.

Within one week (one hour daily), we had the first rough copy completed. The booklet then went through the regular check with other Desano speakers before being printed, and it was then distributed along with the New Testament. The Millers have not been able to return to the language area since their short two-day distribution trip, so I am unable to give an evaluative report of the booklet's effectiveness.

This type of transition booklet has been reproduced in six other languages, with the addition of a list of other books available in the language placed in the back of the booklet. The book list is intended to encourage those who have just learned to read in their language to read more! This has proven to be a valuable and inexpensive way to help members of indigenous language communities, who already read Spanish, learn to read quickly in their own language.

In one area, government educators were excited about the booklet. They wanted to make certain that all teachers, who were speakers of that language, got a copy of it so they could learn how to read and write in their language.

The booklet has been a valuable tool to use in indigenous writers' courses. It can be used to help new participants make the transition from Spanish to the vernacular, and also serves as a review for those who already can read and write to some degree.

Producing the transition booklet is easy. Prerequisites are: 1) working

orthography approved, 2) simple phonology statement, and 3) a word list or small dictionary.

With the prerequisites completed, the major steps follow:

1.Make lists of what needs to be introduced or taught.

- List letters in the vernacular orthography.
- List letters which are the same in the national and vernacular languages.
- List letters appearing in the orthography of the vernacular but not that of the national language.
- List letters that are the same but represent different sound qualities in the vernacular, as opposed to the national language.
- List consonant and vowel combination occurring in the vernacular, but not in the national language, which may need to be introduced.

2.List the order of the elements to be taught:

•Begin with letters that represent the same sound in both languages.

•Introduce letters that occur in the vernacular but not in the national language.

•Introduce letters that appear in the national language but represent different sounds in the vernacular.

•Introduce the consonant and vowel combinations that occur in the vernacular. (Many of these can be taught in context and need not be introduced separately.)

The decision as to when to introduce these elements will depend on the following:

•Frequency of occurrence (for example, in Desano we chose to introduce the new vowel sound u, then all nasalized vowels, making it easier for Eduardo to identify useful picturable words and to write natural sentences)

•Ease of learning (Desanos find it easier to learn the letters which do not appear in Spanish rather than the ones that are the same but represent different sound qualities, so we taught those first)

•Choose a format that is easy to follow.

•Each lesson should be uniform.

•Remember that the book is to be self-teaching.

•Remember that all instruction should be in the national language.

•Introduce the new letter with a simple explanation of that letter's phonetic character written in the national language.

•Encourage the reader by stating often, "You can now read the following words"

4.Include the translation of the vernacular on the same page. (Some people prefer to have the translation in the back of the book. I like to include the translation of the words and simple phrases and stories on the same page. The translation of the longer story, included on the last pages, should be in the back of the book. We decided not to include a translation of the last story in the Desano primer. We hoped this would force the reader to read the Desano. It was thought that some readers would read only the Spanish translation if it were available.)

5. After the picturable words, include a few phrases of short story with picture, if desired.

6. Continue in this way until all new letters and sound combinations are introduced.

7. Finish the booklet with a story or message that will interest all.

8. List other books available in the language and where they can be obtained.

Adapted from Summer Institute of Linguistics (www.sil.org)

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Learning from small books

Mazatec bestseller

A 4* by 6* inch book of only 13 pages is one of the pieces of literature that has been most in demand among the Mazatecs of Husutla de Jiménez, Oaxaca, Mexico. It is an "Animal book," containing nothing more than a list of the Mazatec animal names in the left-hand column with their equivalent in Spanish in the right-hand column. There are about 200 names, including insects (for example, flea), the bigger animals (for example, skunk), and the more rare wild animals (for example, wildcat).

Men as well as children and teenagers buy it. Sometimes a grandmother buys one for her grandchildren. Most of those who buy it, study it by themselves or with their friends until they can read it fluently.

Why is this little book so successful?

Since the people know that the book contains only names of animals, they already have a hint of what each word is. If they know a little something about the alphabet, the syllables, and a smattering of Spanish, they can put these bits of knowledge together and, by half guessing, can read the names of the animals correctly. They are benefiting by a kind of matrix of knowledge; a network of fragments of understanding. It works something like this. The student has a slight idea of how sounds should be spelled, and a head start on the meaning (an animal). Putting those two things together, he is able to read some of the words. Going over the page again he can read a few more. His confidence grows each time he goes down the page until he triumphs : he can read the whole book! He receives satisfaction from having finished something—a kind of satisfaction he would not have experienced if he had just read a few pages of a big book. Finishing a book gives him a sense of closure (K. Pike 1967:81–82). A longer book could make him overwhelmingly discouraged before reaching the end. Similar small books could be made around other topics common to the culture. For example, a booklet naming items used in the kitchen or one naming the different kinds of food, fruits, and vegetables would be good. Small books of related words build on the way a child learns. Somehow, children react to a kind of taxonomic classification or network. They remember or know an item by the way it occurs in context, by knowing the items to which it relates. This is an important part of learning and is much more natural than the alphabetical list found in a dictionary.

Money book

We made a book which listed the numbers in the Huautla Mazatec money system. The Mazatecs count to 10, then 10 plus one, … 15, 15 plus one, … 20 …. Twenty-five is "two moneys" (similar to "two bits" in English). Two pesos and a half is "20 moneys" (that would be 20 bits in English). Their way of counting money is so different from the Spanish way, that not only the Mazatec speakers found the book helpful, but the Spanish-speaking merchants did too. The Mazatecs like it when the Spanish-speaking people buy books written in Mazatec; somehow it increases the value of the Mazatec language in their own eyes.

Minimal pairs book

A book which the Mazatec speakers like to show the Spanish-speaking people is one that lists minimal pairs, accompanied by the Spanish translations. Because the Spanish-speaking folks do not hear the difference between oral versus nasal vowels, between laryngealized versus nonlaryngealized vowels, and between words differing only by tone, some of them have said that the Mazatec language is no good because it has so many words which are pronounced exactly alike. The Mazatecs like the booklet of minimal pairs, for it furnishes proof that the words actually are different; it makes them proud to be able to read the difference between words that sound so much alike. The book helped the Spanish-speaking folk too. Watching the spelling while a Mazatec pronounced the words, they at last began to hear the differences.

The dictionary

The dictionary is a word list of about 2,500 words. It is alphabetized according to the Mazatec words with the Spanish translation beside it. The people do not try to look up specific words, as we so often do in English. Instead, they read down a page just for the fun of it. They get pleasure out of mastering the art of reading, and reading down a page in the dictionary is easier than reading most books. For one thing, the first syllable might be the same for several words in the column. Because of that, they have a start on the pronunciation. Also, if they more or less understand Spanish, the translation gives them a clue. These two kinds of partial knowledge intersect and make a kind of matrix with columns of form and rows of meaning—thus, they have a good chance of guessing

which word they are looking at. They will re-read the page, re-read it again, making better guesses each time. In that way they teach themselves to read the entire page. Because of the minimal change from one word to the next, we have found the dictionary to be very helpful in teaching reading.

Expanding words and phrases book

A booklet made up of groups of expanding words and phrases has been very popular. Ideally, the first word of each group is a simple verb, the smallest form that is used in isolation. (But in the book made up in the Huautla Mazatec language, that was not always so.) The Spanish translation is beneath it. The next word has the same stem, but a suffix has been added. The next has an additional suffix, but still the same stem. Another line may have a prefix indicating tense, and another line has a question marker.

The list of words and phrases keeps the same nucleus, the same stem, but with the margin of the word or phrase expanded, first in one way, and then in another. The booklet makes for easy reading because the student often knows what the stem should be, and the morpheme in the margin (the prefixes, the suffixes, and so forth) usually has a simple syllable pattern.

The Mazatec reader seems to enjoy equating something that may be a simple enclitic in Mazatec with the Spanish translation which is a separate word. He also enjoys the rhythm, a rhyming effect, that develops when he reads, without pause, right down the page.

A group in the booklet might read something like this:

He works.

He is working.

He is working more.

He probably works.

Is he working more?

He is working more there.

He worked.

Did he work?

He worked hard.

He worked quickly.

He has finished working.

I work here.

I work for you.

I'll work for you again.

I haven't worked for you yet.

These groups of words take advantage of the wave structure of language. First the student is given a word which consists of the nucleus only. Then a margin is added, and another margin, and so forth. We assume that this wave structure is somehow basic to language and, therefore, important to incorporate into reading materials (Pike and Pike 1977:26–30) . The groups of words are not seen as having a purely particle structure, in which any particle is as easily learned as any other if it comes first in the sentence. We assume that it is easier for the student to start with the nucleus, and afterwards learn the syllables which are in the margin.

Small book benefits

Economics enters into the reasons for preparing small books—the price for them does not have to be set so high. Semiliterates will risk the price of a small book. They will buy it just on the chance that they will be able to read it, but they may be unwilling to pay the price for a big book until they are sure that they will be able to read it. Also, a child may be able to get the money needed for a small book, but not have a chance at the price of a big one. (For years, I priced a certain sized book according to the cost of an egg. When the price of eggs went up, so did the price of that size book. Occasionally, I was asked if I would swap a book for an egg, and I did.) A semiliterate might hesitate to buy a big book, for fear of being laughed at. I have been told that people who knew that he did not read well might say, "You can't read. What are you doing with a big book like that?" A smaller book they can hide in their pockets or, if it is seen, they are not laughed at because everybody knows that that book is supposed to be an easy-reading one.

There has to be a balance, of course. Sometimes the men who have

learned to read the easy books will ask me for something “hard.” They would tell me, “I already know everything in that.” A person like that needs a bigger book to keep him interested and to help him to grow. For him, there should be available: a history book, a big dictionary, a book of interesting stories, Scripture, and other useful literature.

Pike, Eunice V., author,
Summer Institute of Linguistics

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