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How can instructional materials and supplementary reading materials be effectively developed for target populations speaking multiple dialects?

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1 Introduction

Today's educational contexts are not only multilingual but also multi-dialectal. In the best of situations educational systems are working with a single local language community needing or desiring mother-tongue instruction. The world over, governments, international and local non-governmental organizations, and language committees (UNICEF, Save the Children, Germany, and SIL International, among others) have provided effective mother tongue–based (MTB) instructional materials. Usually these programs have focused on large languages (for example, Quechua in Peru). In languages with multiple dialects it is often the case that it is difficult to decide how to meet everyone's needs/desires when resources are scarce so nothing is done. One solution has been for program designers to select one variety or dialect in which to print materials, while another has been to design a pan-dialect, a composite of all, for material production. Both solutions have left many speakers without the ability to read and write their language.

The task would be easier if there were clear distinctions of what constitutes a language and a dialect. However, the factors which are used to differentiate the two are almost exclusively political and not linguistic (Landerman 2015). Decisions about "which" dialect will receive MTB education has often been in the hands of the central governments, politicians, and donors. In the case of indigenous language communities, however, the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN 2009) established that decisions about education (Articles 11, 13, 14, and 19) need to be made with the community through free, prior, and informed consent.

Therefore, in those languages where there are several dialects it is important for the speakers to decide whether they are one language, or several languages in a language family, or a language with dialects. Does the MTB program align with the desires and understanding of the language community? Educators can play an important role in facilitating community decision making, keeping in mind that writing systems are largely political statements (Cahill 2014:12). How do people identify themselves? How do they feel about people who speak other dialects or neighboring languages? What are their primary uses for written materials both now and potentially in the future?

Providing bi-literacy for a language community is important for lifelong learning. In many languages there are multiple dialects whose linguistic or sociolinguistic realities demand not one but several sets of reading materials in order for comprehension and response to take place. The question then becomes: How can instructional materials and supplementary reading materials be effectively developed when the target populations (schools, adult literacy classes) speak different dialects within a language community?

2 Context

Each language community is distinct. Sizes of dialects vary, and the influence of the national education system differs. The source of income generation (e.g., subsistence farming vs. weavers) can mean more

or less time to study. While many communities have received education through immersion in the national language, results are questionable. To produce effective materials for language communities, it is important to align MTB program decisions not only to the goals of the program designers and funder but also to the goals and context of the target group.

Goals

Materials development is part of a larger program. Each program has a unique set of goals. If the program goals include unification of the language, there will be one approach and one set of materials. If the goal is bi-literacy designed for life-long learning in a local as well as another language, or the development of a growing local language literature, some activities will be the same but participants might differ. Each community has to decide what "effective" means in light of their purposes. Who will do what to whom and to what end? Effectiveness is measured, not at one point of time, but through monitoring, listening, and changing. If a program strategy does not include time, money, or will to listen and change, seldom are materials effective.

Ownership

When a MTB program arises from a desire and request from the language community, internal motivation exists. An externally motivated program, with little or no community involvement in decisions, will likely be ineffective even if every dialect is provided with materials. If the emphasis of the program is merely comprehension and does not include the development of independent writers and a growing literature, the program will also be short-lived. "Effective" bi-literacy demands competent, confident writers of the language and an infrastructure to produce new materials for the community.

Orthography

Foundational to effective materials is the writing system. Whether there is an established orthography or one has to be developed, there are challenges. Living languages change through contact with other languages. They are influenced by local religions with differing scripts, and by a growing sense of ethnic identity. Effective orthographies depend on the flexibility of designers and users, and the dialectal diversity of phonological, lexical, and grammatical elements. If the orthography is not intuitive, nor seen as representing the spoken language, it is less likely to be used. However, all of these obstacles can be overcome when there is enough internal motivation to compromise (Adams 2014:245).

3 Recommendations: Some ideas to try

The following recommendations are based on the assumption that the MTB reading program being considered is desired and supported by at least a portion of the language community. Also, it is important that designers consider more than just linguistic factors of intelligibility, morphology, syntax, phonology, and lexicon. These factors are important but equally so are the ease of material production and readability, and most important of all is the acceptance and ownership in the community.

3.1 Prestige dialect

Perhaps the easiest solution in a multi-dialectal language is where there is a prestige dialect which the other dialects accept as the standard. For those MTB materials to be effective the lexical and grammatical differences must be so minimal that good comprehension and written response can be experienced. The inclusion of multi-dialectal dictionaries, simple comparative descriptions of the grammar, and a "shallow" orthography can increase comprehension and aid the development of writers (Friesen 2002).

While this seems the easiest solution, seldom does it work. In the competition for resources, some dialects are seen as more deserving and resentments arise, particularly when outsiders are making the decisions. Often problems arise out of a unified orthography, and although it would be possible to learn, the desire to have one's own writing system can make unification impossible.

3.2 Two smaller dialects

After considering linguistic and social factors, two smaller dialect communities may be encouraged to join forces. One example of where this was piloted was in central Peru where there are at least five dialects of one Quechua [que] language. The tough question was how to begin with few resources. After assessing ethnic identity, and linguistic and lexical differences across the five varieties, it was decided that two of the five varieties, Huallaga (HG, pronounced "Why-Yá-ga") and Pachitea (PN, pronounced "pa-chi-Té-a") would be combined into one project. The project developed a set of materials: a pre-reading book for HG and PN and 3 books for initial reading instruction. Book 1 taught orthography elements used by both HG and PN. Care was taken to use only shared lexical items in book 1. In Books 2 and 3 the teaching elements and lexical items differed slightly while following similar cultural themes. This dual-dialectical strategy facilitated teacher training, reduced the cost of publications, and promoted unity rather than diversity. Writers' workshops (Weber, Wroge, and Yoder 2007) provided training for writing and editing the supplemental reading materials that were used. For several years the materials proved effective; children were reading and writing in the two varieties. However, as community leaders became enamored with the idea that "different is better," not only were there changes to the orthography but a "them" and "us" dichotomy became more prevalent and two different sets of materials became necessary.[5]

3.3 Sustainable Use Model (SUM)

It is important to assist language communities as they think through how they want future generations to use their language. World-wide, language communities are becoming aware that the future of their language and culture is at risk. Lewis and Simons have developed the Sustainable Use Model (SUM) to help members of local speech communities and those organizations working with them to reflect on how "they will transmit life-crucial knowledge to future generations" (2015:11).

To help language communities have access to the SUM, Hanawalt, Varenkamp, Lahn, and z have produced "A Guide for Planning the Future of Our Language" (PFOL). Languages in the Americas, Asia, and the Pacific regions have held workshops in communities to help identify issues of ethnic identity, linguistic diversity, and possible orthography design or revision. Using the guide to identify the current status of their language and their hopes for the future, many groups have expressed a desire for MTB literacy instruction for both children and adults, perhaps as a way to preserve or enrich their language for future generations. At the same time, they have acquired a better understanding of available resources and their responsibility to publish and train. As yet, few MTB programs have developed after using PFOL, but there are language communities working on the issues of approved orthographies, the training of teachers in multilingual settings, and the local development of reading materials. All of this activity creates not only interest and ownership of the future of their language, but it means more informed decisions by project designers in the formal sector.

3.4 Transfer guides

Speakers of the local language who have studied in the national language can more easily be guided to fluent reading and writing through transfer guides. Even before "Education for All," most countries in the Americas had established formal education in rural areas. Primary education, usually through Spanish, Portuguese, or English, resulted in readers of the national language who could quickly learn to read and write in their local language. Since the skills of knowing how to read in one language can be

[5]Adams notes that "an orthography cannot extend group identity beyond any pre-existing political or social organization" (2014:241). Where dialect groups already cooperate within some structure, the chances of accepting a unified or collaborative writing system are greater.

transferred to learning to read and write in a second, some communities are using transfer guides, materials designed to facilitate L2 literates to read in their L1. When there are L2 literates in various dialects, transfer guides (not nearly as complex as initial reading instruction materials) can be made, adapting for multiple dialects if needed. Transfer guides result in a large group of L1 literates in various dialects. Those literates can then be the writers, designers, and illustrators of materials for the selected dialects chosen for school programs. Once there are readers and writers of the L1, the community is more able to say which dialects will be used for literacy, what type of materials are desired, and who will be the writers of the materials.

In Panama, the Guaymi (Ngäbere language, [gym]) had L1 materials designed for the community but there were no L1 teachers and there was not much interest in reading. When Eric Kindberg (an SIL linguist) spoke with the leaders, they decided to produce a transfer guide for those who were literate in Spanish. A transfer guide was developed, making it possible to have sufficient L1 readers, writers, and teachers to develop a more formal program for the school. The orthographies and some cultural content had to be adjusted for the various groups. It was not an easy task but community leaders willingly gave their time (Eric Kindberg, pers. comm. August, 2015). One cultural benefit that resulted was that once parents and elders were able to read and write in the L1, their knowledge was more respected. It also gave greater value to the local language.

The L2 to L1 bi-literacy approach, using a transfer guide, provides program designers with writers and readers of the L1 in a very short time, and strengthens the community's ability to use their language in expanded contexts. An example of this comes from Guyana. New L1 literates in the Wapishana [wap] community are using Bloom[6], a simple publishing tool, and have produced several volumes of easy-to-read stories. Today it is possible for communities to create simple books themselves and to strengthen local language capacity (Bloom 2016).

4 Conclusion

Which dialect should be used? To have effective literacy materials, the answer should come from within the language community. When designing literacy programs, the goals, the resources, the outcomes, and the assessment tools should be agreed upon by the community. Everyone involved should know "who does what to whom and with what desired outcomes."

Pedagogy and methodology also influence "which dialect." A student-centered approach will focus on the interests of the learner, providing for an active role in learning and in the choice of content. If instruction is in the learners' dialect the program is more student centered than if instruction is in a different dialect.

Finally, underlying the question of "which dialect" is the need for an agreed-upon definition for language, dialect, and variety. When a community insists that it is a language, not a dialect, who gets to decide? Language communities will ultimately decide on the basis of their political and social needs. The stakes are high for many language communities. Who decides their future? The Declaration of Indigenous Rights would say that they do!

[6] Bloom is a free program available at http://bloomlibrary.org/. The website includes a library of shell books that can be adapted for multiple languages. Books can be created in diglot or triglot as well.

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