

Wall-chart primers

by Jack Popjes

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According to Alvin Toffler in his book, *The Third wave*, the start of the industrial revolution about 300 years ago was also the beginning of our regimented, majority-oriented, and mass education system. We were all educated under this system: one with lots of books, classrooms, regular hours, set number of months and years, and everyone learning in lockstep, and so forth. This was necessary to train people for regimented life in factories, offices, and workshops.

The Indians we deal with are by no manner part of the Second wave. Many are barely into the First wave of social change, that is, fixed farming. Many are still in the Pre-First wave stage, that is, hunting and gathering, with an extreme minimum of subsistence farming.

No wonder we regimented and regimenting educators of the Second wave are driven out of our minds by the problems of trying to educate these peoples who are not about to be regimented, have no tradition of, and no need to be regimented, lined up, marched into classes, locked into an artificial time system, and so forth.

So when we try to teach in daily classroom situations, inevitably students are absent for a few days, and after only a week or so the teacher finds he has no two students learning the same page of the primer.

After a few months of this, a great many beginning primers have been used up, carried off, and ruined with very little to show for it. A few students do persist, and carry on with the rest of the primer set. Our experience, thus far, has shown that we go through about five first primers for every second or third primer.

(1989). *Notes on Literacy*, 58.

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One possible solution to this problem, which we want to experiment with in the Canela, is to fit in with the local customs and culture by helping Canelas learn to read by observation. When a literate Canela shares his knowledge with someone else, others inevitably observe. When he uses a few primers, all the folks sitting around can see a half-dozen heads bowed over some books. When, however, he uses a chart, people from clear across the other side of the shelter can see the words and letters being taught. Thus while the inner circle is learning to read, the outer group is getting good prereading exposure.

We, therefore, want to supply one person in each settlement with a set of first-primer charts which he can use to teach whoever comes to him to be taught, whenever they come to him. Then, when someone can read all the wall charts, that is, the first primer, he can be given a second and then the third primer and practically teach himself the rest of the letters.

The system of certain people teaching on their own initiative has worked very well. Except, of course, that they go through vast quantities of first primers. The chart system should stop that, as well as expose a wider audience to the teaching process.

Our use of wall charts is not entirely motivated by financial considerations, however. We want to do whatever we can to fit in as much as possible with the cultural way of teaching. The teacher-central classroom-scheduled-regimented approach is a complete and total failure for teaching post-teen Canelas, and grossly inefficient in teaching the smaller children. Now that our large (1,000+) village seems to be breaking up into a half-dozen semipermanent villages, a formal school will be even less effective.

While trying to be creative about working within financial and cultural limitations in our literacy efforts, I think we should also keep in mind the broader picture: I still believe that the motivation of the learners is the single most important factor in a society's turning literate. All other things, such as methods, orthography, primers, and so forth are relatively insignificant in comparison.