Training Members of Minority Language Groups to Write Listening Stories

by Elizabeth Braun Foerster
Abstract:
Some minority language groups in Thailand are diligently working to create a collection of stories that can be read to four- and five-year-old children in mother-tongue kindergartens, early-childhood-care centers or at home. Local language speakers are receiving training regarding the process of writing stories that will interest young children. They are becoming aware that stories written in their own language can help young children develop an appreciation for their language as well as help develop listening, speaking, imaginative and creative thinking skills. This paper discusses the nature of the listening story, reports on the process of conducting writers’ workshops and suggests potential challenges participants may have in writing these kinds of stories.

Introduction
That reading to young children encourages language development is well-established in literature (Bowkett 2008). Results from some of this research conducted in languages with a rich repository of literary history and well-established educational systems, may also apply to languages that have more recently developed a written form and are just beginning to develop a corpus of literature.

This paper discusses the nature of listening stories written specifically for children in early childhood care and education programs and mother tongue based multilingual educations programs in Thailand. It also discusses the process of educating native speaker writers about the importance of listening stories, about what makes a good listening story and about how to write these stories for an audience of four-year-olds.

Listening stories
Imagine a classroom in a rural village with four-year-olds sitting quietly in front of their teacher, their eyes focused on her as they listen intently to every word. She is reading a story, but not just any story. It’s a “listening story” in their own language and about their own culture. As the teacher reads aloud, the children watch her look at the words on the page(s) and observe the reading process. Even though the story has no pictures, when read well, it still captivates the students’ attention. Occasionally, the teacher pauses to ask questions. When she finishes the students are able to respond to her questions and talk about aspects of the story, including the setting, the characters, why they liked the story and how it made them feel.

While participating in this listening story event, these children are also developing skills that will benefit them the rest of their lives. They are learning to focus while using their imaginations. Such a process helps them develop skills to better understand and use their mother tongue. They learn new words and are exposed to different contexts and ways in which words are used, (Bowkett 2008:92)

Listening Stories are written at the listeners’ age level with details and descriptions that enable the listener to “see and feel” what is happening. Usually one to two pages long, these stories take up to five minutes to read aloud, depending on whether the teacher stops to ask specific questions during the story to keep the children actively engaged.
Teachers prepare these open-ended questions to ask the children about the story ahead of time (Bowkett 2008:96). The children develop a sense of curiosity about what is on the written page and listening to stories read aloud build awareness that written text has meaning. Ideally, it will plant a desire in the children to want to learn to read on their own (Bowkett 2008:92).

The need for listening stories
In Thailand, some minority language groups are starting “Mother Tongue Early Childhood Care and Education” programs or “Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education” programs. In these programs the students’ mother tongue is the main language of instruction for kindergarten-age students. In rural areas of Thailand students typically attend two years of kindergarten, beginning at four years of age. The curriculum for these students focuses on developing listening, speaking and creative thinking skills. (Bloom 1956)

Instructional materials need to be developed for the curriculum of these programs and because each language group is unique, each has to prepare its own language-specific materials. Lessons are planned around weekly themes that coincide with events or activities that happen during the year, reflect what the children know and enjoy about their community, or highlight cultural values the community wants to instill in their children (Malone 2006:12–13). These themes then become the basis for the listening stories.

Training minority language speakers to write listening stories
The Training Unit of The Payap University Linguistics Institute conducted a one-week workshop in October 2008: “Promoting the Local Language (Mother Tongue) by Writing and Using Stories.” Fifty-three people attended, representing the Bisu, Lahu, Prai, Akeu, Pwo Karen, Mon, Mien, Khmu, Hmong, Kachin and Thai languages. The language of instruction was Thai.

Why listening stories are important
Participants in the workshop first learned why listening stories are an important component of a mother tongue education program. They learned about these findings from research and teachers’ experience (Little Ones Reading Resource 2003–2009).

A) Children who are routinely read to by parents and teachers tend to become better readers and perform better in school.
B) Reading to children encourages language and speech development. Children gain a larger vocabulary, improved pronunciation, and better knowledge of grammar and sentence structure through hearing stories, poems and songs.
C) When children discuss a story after it is read they gain confidence in using language and in sharing their ideas.
D) Children who are frequently read to have longer attention spans.
E) Curiosity, creativity and imagination develop in the process of being read to.
F) Most importantly, children who are read to are much more likely to enjoy reading, read well, and become life-long readers.
Characteristics of a good story
Participants learned that good listening stories contain several important characteristics. The stories must be written clearly and with adequate detail to enable the reader and listener to picture the characters, setting and events. Stories should stand alone, without the need for pictures as this develops the listener's creative thinking skills, engages their imaginations and also develops their attention spans. These skills are essential for their further education.

To help participants analyze listening stories, they listened to examples of good stories and then answered questions such as:

1. Did the story use natural language?
2. What made the characters interesting? (Backes 2008a).
3. What happened in the plot that was engaging? (Backes 2008b).
4. What details did the writer include to make the story seem real and interesting? (Backes 2008c).
5. How did this story make you feel when it ended—sad, angry, happy, afraid or some other feeling?

Choosing topics
Participants then began the story-writing process by listing topics that might be interesting to children in their communities. They also thought about events and activities that happen throughout the year and are familiar to children. It was pointed out on the one hand, that existing traditional folk tales or stories relating to the weekly theme could be rewritten for the intended audience, but on the other hand, using new stories can “create excitement and anticipation as they try to work out what might happen next. Anticipation, incidentally, is a thinking skill that is useful in many different contexts of a child’s learning” (Bowkett 2008:96).

Word banks
Following the choice of topic, the next step in the writing process was creating vocabulary lists, or word banks, of personality characteristics, physical characteristics, descriptive phrases, comparative phrases, and verb, noun, adjective and adverb synonyms from their languages to reference whenever they write stories. This gives writers many choices of descriptive words to develop their characters, describe actions and ‘paint’ their settings in varied ways.

Drafting and editing a story
Once the participants developed vocabulary word banks, they then chose their characters, decided on a storyline and began writing draft stories. They also learned how to edit their stories to improve them. After editing, they worked with others to solicit additional feedback on how to further improve their stories (Malone 2006).

A copy of the manual used during the writing workshop was given to each participant to use as a reference source in order to continue to write stories and train others in their communities (Miller 2008).
One example: A listening story writing workshop for Bisu speakers:

**The Bisu**

Some of those who attended the Payap Linguistics Institute workshop were members of the Bisu language group. In August 2009, the Bisu hosted a similar four-day workshop in one of their villages. Two Bisu women led the workshop with the help of an SIL facilitator. One of these women had attended the first workshop; the other had received individual training from the SIL facilitator.

The people who attended the village workshop came from two villages. Those attending came with different skill levels of reading and writing the Bisu language. Only one woman had previously written stories. This was a new challenge for everyone else.

**Materials and procedure**

Participants at the Bisu village workshop were given portions in Thai of the same manual that was given to the participants of the first workshop. For each new skill presented, one of the leaders read the explanation aloud in Thai and the other leader then explained it more thoroughly in Bisu.

**Writing a story as a group**

The Bisu, a group-oriented society, enjoy group activities so they suggested writing a story together for practice before they tried to write their own individual stories. The following account is an example of the process the group went through in writing one “Listening Story” together.

**Choosing a topic and storyline**

Beginning with the first step in the manual, the Bisu workshop participants thought and talked together about the topics that might interest small children in their villages. They focused their attention on children in the 3 to 5 age range since they hope to start a mother-tongue early childhood care and education center in their villages. They brainstormed together and came up with a number of topics. For the group story they all agreed that “Hunting for Rhinoceros Beetles” would be good since this is a very popular activity among the children.

The participants shared their thoughts about the storyline and the leader wrote their ideas on a large sheet of paper. Then they sketched out a skeleton of the story thinking of ideas for an introduction and a plot, including the climax and resolution. Following the next step in the manual, they talked about the characters. They gave them names and wrote something about the characteristics of each one.

As they considered the plot they had chosen, they decided that having a group of boys go into the forest to hunt beetles, find them and sell them wasn’t exciting enough. It was too predictable. They realized that they needed to build interest by having something unexpected happen in order to maintain interest.
Participants reconsidered their characters and what could possibly happen that would create a problem to be solved. Soon someone suggested that one of the little boys could spot a bunch of beetles up in the tree, shout excitedly to the others and then everyone could run to grab them. The problem would begin when the little boys who had first seen the beetles weren’t able to get any because the big boys were quicker and grabbed them before the little boys could. The little boys were mad and cried because they knew they wouldn’t get any money from selling the beetles.

The writers discussed this among themselves, “Is this a big enough problem to make the story interesting?” “How is the problem going to be solved at the end of the story?” They decided they had to make the big boys get so tired of the small boys crying that they agreed to share the profit from the sale of the beetles so that everyone would get the same amount of money. The story ended with everyone happy about the profit they each got from finding and selling the beetles. The authors decided together that they wanted the listeners to feel happy and relieved when the story was over and also to learn that sharing was good. Feeling happy and relieved and sharing with others are cultural values among the Bisu.

The setting
Next the group discussed the important elements in describing the setting. They added details about the time of day, the weather, and where the story was taking place.

To expand the vocabulary, they looked at the word banks they had prepared earlier. From this list of descriptive words they discussed whether there were any that would make the story more clear and engaging.

Editing the story
When the group had finished writing the whole story, the leader read it aloud. They changed those parts of the story wherever the language didn’t sound clear or natural. They spent a lot of time deciding on the best way to say things in Bisu. When there was a problem with how something was written, the group discussed different ways of saying the phrase or sentence, came to a consensus and then continued. The leaders would often suggest ways to say things but would wait for approval from the older people before writing it on the paper, out of respect for the older people’s opinions.

After the story was modified, read aloud again and approved by everyone, the group practiced reading it aloud together many times. This helped build their confidence and skill in reading their language. They wanted to be ready to read it aloud to children in their villages to see if it really was fun and entertaining to listen to. They were all pleased with their work.

At the end of the Bisu workshop the participants concluded by consensus that there should be a second workshop for the teenagers in the villages to learn these same skills.
Observations from these writers workshops

- Even with training some writers needed extra help and encouragement to write stories that engaged listeners. Some seemed to appreciate the opportunity to talk through their story with a consultant and think together about how to make it more entertaining.

- Some minority language groups have shown interest in writing and producing stories in order to help preserve and promote the use of their language and build an interest in reading and writing their languages. One group, the Lahu, have compiled 20 of their favorite stories into a book to sell in villages.

- Some stories composed in the writer’s workshops did not have happy endings. A writer’s world view is reflected in his or her stories and in some cultures, stories often end with death and sadness. In these cases, the leaders discussed with the author the reasons why the story was not appropriate for four-year-olds and they worked together to adapt the story to make it suitable.

For example, one story written by a Karen man was about a man who was sleeping under a pine tree. A pine cone fell on his head while he was sleeping. When he woke up he beat up his wife because he was angry at her for throwing a pine cone at him. The author was willing to change the story to be about two boys sleeping under a pine tree and one boy blaming the other for throwing a pine cone at him and wanting to hurt his friend back, until they both figured out that the pine cone had fallen from the tree.

Conclusion

Training members of minority language groups to write listening stories can enable parents and other community members to be active participants in their children’s education. These stories not only help in first language development, they create a foundation for reading their language once they begin school. These stories can form an important part of the curriculum for mother-tongue kindergartens or early-childhood-care centers. Workshop venues such as those described above, as well as one-on-one consulting can help and encourage authors to write good listening stories that young children will enjoy.
References


Miller, Michelle, and Payap University Linguistics Institute Training Unit Team, 2008. Workshop Manual for Promoting Mother Tongue Education through the Writing and Use of Listening Stories. Unpublished Manuscript. Payap University Linguistics Institute, Chiang Mai, Thailand. This manual was produced in both English and Thai.
