Transition literacy workshops in the Peruvian Andes

by Nancy J. Loveland

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1. Introduction

The Peruvian Andes consist of mountain ranges, valleys, flat plains, rivers, and high empty spaces; towns, villages, farms, and fields; Quechua, mestizos (Spanish speakers of Quechua ancestry), and Spanish, monolinguals, incipient bilinguals, and coordinate bilinguals; rich, middle class, and poor; farmers, professionals, and small businessmen; a conglomerate of people and places.

People live on the valley floor in towns and cities and all up and down the sides of the valley in small, isolated hamlets. Quechua people also live in communities on the high plains and plateaus at around 14,000 feet. Many areas are accessible only by trail. Some have dirt roads that wind their way up through the narrow canyons. During rainy season (January through April) many parts are accessible only on foot. Most Quechua are subsistence farmers, scratching out an existence on the eroding hillsides, where the soil must have fertilizer to produce anything.

When the Spanish came in the 1500s, they found Quechua and Aymara people throughout the mountains. Education began through the Spanish Catholic church, and the Spanish language and culture began to overshadow the native languages and cultures. The prestige of Spanish continues to degrade Quechua and Aymara. There are many places in Peru where people coming to town bring their “city” clothes with them (1992). Notes on Literacy, 18(1).
and change just outside the city, not wanting to be seen as indio ‘Indian’. Many mountain dwellers understand Quechua but refuse to speak it. When asked a question in Quechua, they answer in Spanish, often a very broken Spanish. In a few remote areas native languages have died out, but still the majority of monolingual Quechua speakers live high up in isolated hamlets and farms. The majority of adult monolinguals are women. In the remote areas, the men who speak Spanish tend to be the town leaders or authorities, taking care of paper work or negotiating for the town with the regional authorities. In the valleys, most bilinguals are losing their Quechua through disuse and the desire to disassociate themselves from their culture and language.

Education among the populace of the mountains is well established, especially in the less remote areas. There are public schools throughout the valleys and up into the higher altitudes, even in almost inaccessible areas. Many school teachers, living in towns, walk up for a few hours to reach their classrooms, which are located in distant villages. Until recently, however, schooling in the mountains has been in Spanish only. Some of the teachers are themselves Quechua speakers and some will use Quechua in the outlying schools to help the children who are monolinguals. But, schooling is still primarily in Spanish. Those who learn to read, learn to read in Spanish. Hence, there are Quechua speakers who read only in their second language, Spanish. Unfortunately, the majority of these people are not readers in the true sense. For reasons such as lack of Spanish vocabulary or a negative school experience, many just “word call” or “syllable call” and do not read with understanding.

Most mountain children go to school through the primary grades. However, since schooling is in Spanish, monolingual Quechua might repeat first grade three or four times because of the language barrier. There are secondary schools, but these are usually near the main roads in cities and towns. Students from more remote areas must walk long distances every day or perhaps find a place to live during the week so that they may attend high school. Normal schools and universities are possibilities for further education, but not many Quechua go on for further schooling.

2. The Ancash situation

The setting is the Callejón de Huaylas ‘Huaylas valley’ in the Department of Ancash, in the central highlands of the Andes. There are approximately 200,000 speakers of this Quechua dialect, ranging from monolinguals to bilinguals (incipient and coordinate). The people live at altitudes varying from 6,000 to around 14,000 feet above sea level. Agriculture, education, and bilingualism in Ancash are typical of the Andes.

The value of Quechua as a language and culture, however, is fairly high in Ancash in comparison with other areas of the mountains. Even in larger towns and cities, Quechua is the language of the market; most merchants speak Quechua in order to sell to their customers. Many of the Ancash Quechua women are not ashamed to wear their multicolored skirts nor to carry their produce in their shawls to the market. Regional hats are worn as protection from the intense sun or the pounding rain, as well as to show where they are from. There are, however, those who would rather leave the old ways and become like the Spanish speakers.

3. The factors

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The question of accessibility of outlying rural areas is a major factor in the SIL literacy program in Ancash. Subversive activity and the vicissitudes of weather combine to close down roads to many small Quechua communities. The extensive dialect area and geographic inaccessibility of many towns has complicated the issue of reaching the more isolated, monolingual Quechua.

Another complication in the literacy program and effort has been the local rejection, due to sociolinguistic issues, of the pan-Quechua orthography, presently endorsed officially by the Ministry of Education. In the central highlands, members of the regional Academia Quechua ‘Quechua Academy’ have discussed the issues and developed a regional orthography which is acceptable at the local level, but has met with some resistance at the national level.

SIL is committed to foster an ongoing program: to encourage the propagation of reading and writing even when we have moved on. A program that will continue without our help, with Quechuas in charge is what is needed.

4. The needs

An SIL language program has been going on in the Huaylas valley of Ancash since the early 1960s. Many portions of the New Testament have been translated and are in final draft form. Due to political changes and other factors, work on these portions was put on hold. Also within this language program, an SIL literacy component had begun in the Huaylas area, but due to sociolinguistic problems, it did not really get off the ground. The interruption of the publication of Scripture portions and other literature has had a stalling effect on the literacy effort.

In 1988, the influx of new language program personnel made it possible for the program to be resumed. Efforts were begun to revise the existing translations and ready them for publication. Because rough drafts existed of major portions of the New Testament, mother tongue translation checkers were needed. These checkers had to be able to read and write Quechua.

With the possibility for almost instantaneous publication of half of the New Testament, it became imperative that a new literacy program go into full swing, to prepare readers for the newly published Scriptures. However, a literacy program does not consist of only a primer or two. Reading material must be available to keep newly literate readers reading. Literature of varying degrees of difficulty and of different interests was needed. Who should write the literature? Native Quechua speakers would be able to write culturally acceptable and relevant materials better than anyone who has learned it as a second language. Therefore, writing had to be taught as well as reading.

The problem was at least three-fold; readers and writers for checking, readers for Scriptures and literature for readers. Being the only literacy specialist assigned to the Huaylas team at the time, I saw the needs as immense and immediate, and the factors almost insurmountable: set up a program that will be ongoing, extensive geographically, and do it now!

5. A solution—theory

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In response to the bilingual and semiliterate audiences that SIL is encountering in various areas of the world, there has been a movement to begin with transition literacy—teaching people who are literate in a second language (L2) to read their mother tongue (L1). After a transition program has begun, literacy for the nonliterate would then be started. Sometimes a simultaneous program is begun with nonliterate and literate (1,2,3). The transition strategy applies particularly well to the mountain Quechua situation of Peru.

A transition program (L2 to L1) is the fastest way to train readers and writers. If a person is literate in one language, reading skills may be transferred easily to another language, especially if the orthographic conventions are similar. In her article, “Beginning with semiliterates,” Ann Roke Cates writes about the advantages of a transition literacy program:

They have a head start—they know what reading is about. There are quicker returns for student, teacher, and village … It is quicker to supply literature for semiliterates and there is a closer prospect of them turning out literature (1972).

The L2 literates do not need to relearn what it means to read; they must just learn how to read the new and different letters in their mother tongue, and any differences in the writing system, such as punctuation. There is no problem with the semantics or syntax, as the people are native speakers.

6. A solution—practice

Keeping in mind the needs and the factors mentioned above, reading and writing workshops were planned to aim at Quechua speakers literate or semiliterate in Spanish. SIL linguist, John Tuggy, planned and directed the first transition literacy workshop at the SIL Center in Huaraz, a major city in the Callejón de Huaylas. Subsequent workshops took place in other areas of the valley, at the request of various private and government entities.

Three types of workshops were held:

1) Beginning reading and writing courses (L2 to L1 transition) for adults and for children

2) An advanced course to teach text editing

3) A literacy instructor training course

Initially, the week-long transition literacy workshops used no written instructional materials. Students read from the chalkboard and mimeographed sheets and wrote on the chalkboard and in notebooks. These early workshops were taught by trained linguists who spoke Quechua. Later courses used a rough draft transition primer. This same rough draft was used in the teacher training course along with a teacher’s guide, also in rough draft. Lectures were given on Quechua grammar, orthography, and the value of Quechua as a language and culture. Discussions frequently followed lectures, especially those on the value of Quechua. The participants talked about the negative responses they have received from Spanish speakers and how they felt.

In the advanced reading and writing course, participants from prior beginning reading and writing courses heard lectures on creative writing and text editing. Practice in reading stories and Scripture figured highly in these workshops. The workshops lasted two days and students edited their own stories, ones they had written during the previous course.

Sixteen adults who already knew how to read and write in Quechua desired to learn how to teach reading in Quechua to others. A teacher training course was set up. Each student brought one student to the class. The 16 teachers, trading off teaching responsibilities lesson by lesson, practiced teaching reading, writing, and grammar, under the direction of SIL linguist/literacy specialists. These student teachers also helped in the second revision of the transition primer.

One area in which the transition literacy workshop staff experimented was the method of introducing the letters of the Quechua alphabet. Ernest Lee’s article on transition literacy presented three methods of introducing the sound-letter correspondence in L2 to L1 transition: from known to unknown letters, from unknown letters to known ones, and introducing letters according to their frequency of usage in the target language. We tried the first and third of these methods. In using the “known to the unknown” method, letters that are similar in both languages are reviewed. Readers feel successful when they can read words in their mother tongue without difficulty. However, Quechua and Spanish share some letters whose sound values differ and appear farther down the list than their frequency indicated they should, making story writing very difficult and stilted. Connected reading versus instant success, that was the dilemma I faced. Having tried both methods, I chose the “known to unknown” letter introduction order for the rough draft of the transition primer. However, the materials are still in the revision process.

The end result of each workshop was the production of materials. In the children’s transition workshop, daily homework was assigned: after each letter was introduced, the children drew a picture and wrote the keyword for their individual ABC booklet. A compilation of the pictures done by the class produced a “group” ABC book. In each adult class, students authored stories and illustrated them. These stories were later edited for future publication.

The tangible outcome of these workshops has been the training of four translation checkers, the beginning of a collection of stories to be published, the revising of a transition primer, and training of literacy instructors. Attitudinal changes toward Quechua as to language and culture will not come quickly, but it is beginning. The realization that Quechuas can be read and written has begun to give Quechua a standing among the languages of the world in the minds of Quechua speakers.

7. Conclusion

During the past year, the transition literacy workshops described above began to meet the needs of the language program, including the needs of the Quechua community as expressed by the Department of Education, the regional Quechua Academy, and the church, as well as SIL’s needs. The local Education Office has initiated a push for bilingual education in the primary grades over the last few years. I see this as a growing issue in the mountains. It is possible that transition literacy would help older brothers and sisters now unable to get into a bilingual program. Discussions between SIL and the local Department of Education have already taken place in this regard.

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The regional Quechua Academy is very much interested in Quechua literacy. Two of its members are extremely capable and could teach Quechua grammar and orthography. SIL language program personnel are being encouraged by the Catholic Church to publish the Scriptures quickly, and the church is also interested in Quechua literacy. The environment is right for an ongoing program. There are those who can take over the direction, and with or without our help keep it going. There is still much to be done: more literature, better primers for transition and for nonliterate, more workshops for adult literacy, story writing and editing, teacher training, and so forth. While the iron is hot, hopefully, we will have the time and the opportunity to strike.

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Citations


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View document See also MacDonald, G. 1979 Bibliography (Literacy)