What is the Multistrategy method?

by Mary Stringer

(C) 2018 SIL International®. All rights reserved.
Fair-Use Policy: Publications in SIL’s Notes on Literacy series are intended for personal and educational use. You may make copies of these publications for instructional purposes free of charge (within fair-use guidelines) and without further permission. Republication or commercial use of SIL’s Notes on Literacy is expressly prohibited without the written consent of the copyright holder.

Originally published as:


[Topics: Multistrategy instructional program]

1. Introduction

Writing! An interesting topic. Can you write? In asking that question I am not focusing on form. We all know how to write! But what about writing our thoughts in a creative, interesting way so that others will want to read what we have written. Are we all writers? You will probably agree with me that many of us do have trouble writing down our thoughts coherently and clearly. Recently, in Tumam Village in Papua New Guinea, I was helping to teach an ongoing class of new literate adults. A woman came to me and said that she could read but her hand would not write and her thinking would not write.

One pertinent factor in formulating the Multistrategy method was the realization that the people being taught in our literacy classes were able to read and, with practice, could gain in fluency but they could not write down their “thinking.”

2. The Multistrategy method: Why?

2.1. Historical perspective

In the early 1960s, when Joyce Hotz and I started work in the Waffa language in Papua New Guinea, I made up a primer using the format of one key picture and one keyword using a key consonant or vowel.
As soon as the vowels were introduced, each consonant was taught with the five vowels on one page. Each page had words using some of the five syllables, but sentences were not introduced until the last page of the first primer. We soon learned that this presentation was inadequate, but by using two sight words on the first pages of the primer, we added sentences on each page and developed a series of five primers. Many learned to read using this series, but ongoing classes were needed for students to learn to read fluently with comprehension. Writing was also taught, but few learned to write confidently so that their writing could be understood.

Then the Gudschinsky method came to Papua New Guinea. Many teams used it successfully and gained help from the sound principles on which it was based. In the early 1980s, I did a detailed study in Waffa using the Gudschinsky method in teaching young children to read and write (Stringer 1983). This study led to some in-depth research on cultural learning styles (Stringer 1983, 1984). Note one of my final comments in the assessment (1983:220):

Research into the viability of using a more structured “language-experience” approach which meets some of the demands of cultural learning styles in Papua New Guinea would be needed if teaching by wholes were considered a suitable approach.

At that time there was no thought in my mind to pursue a holistic approach, but in late 1984, the Australian Reading Association invited Donald Graves to speak at their conference in Melbourne. At the same time, during the South Pacific SIL, where I was helping teach, many of us were seeking to come to grips with the theories behind the reading and writing processes and the practical outworking of such theories.

2.2. Theoretical orientation

At the conference, I discovered that there were people not only talking about process writing (Graves 1983) but they were also introducing the concept of process reading modeled along the same lines as process writing. My questions were numerous because I could not see how anyone could read and write stories from the first day of literacy instruction. Gradually, a pattern began to form and I caught a glimpse of the principles underlying the concept of teaching by wholes.

And yet, to me, there were three obvious reasons why such an approach would not work in the different cultural settings found in Papua New Guinea:

1) There was virtually no print in the various languages from which to set up a print environment in the classroom.

2) It was necessary to recruit men and women with no previous training and to instruct them in the teaching patterns.

3) Such teachers trained for short periods needed a structured approach.
It became obvious from our reading and discussions at the SPSIL literacy course that there were two major practical applications of the theoretical orientations behind the reading process, which, for convenience, I will call bottom-up and top-down. It also became obvious to me that a grasp of the basic principles of each approach were needed for a person to become a fluent reader.

A comprehensive study of Frank Smith and Kenneth Goodman’s writings had given many students a bias toward a whole language approach to reading and writing instruction. Samuels and Kamil (1984:187) comment on Goodman’s model, “… it is accurate to assert that his model always prefers the cognitive economy of reliance on well-developed linguistic (syntactic and semantic) rather than graphic information.” Of Frank Smith’s work they say:

> It is not so much a model of reading as it is a description of the linguistic and cognitive processes that any decent model of reading will need to take into account …… Perhaps the greatest contribution of Smith’s work is to explain how the redundancy inherent at all levels of language (letter features, within letters, within words, within sentences, within discourse) … provide the reader with enormous flexibility in marshaling resources to create a meaning to the text.

In seeking to find a practical model for instruction in literacy in preliterate societies using the Smith-Goodman orientation, the question I persisted in asking of whole language teachers was, “But how do you teach word attack skills?” At this stage there seemed to be no clear answer in the minds of the practitioners. This was not surprising “because Whole Language is not, as many believe, an instructional approach to the teaching of literacy but rather a set of beliefs about language, a philosophical approach which draws on a variety of disciplines ….” (Bouffler 1990:2)

The clearest answer to my question came from Lewis Larking, a lecturer at the Institute of Education, Rockhampton, Australia. This was more than a year after I had set up prep schools in the Enga Province of Papua New Guinea. Larking used Don Holdaway’s Model of Balancing Approaches and Materials (Holdaway 1979) to explain the Whole Language approach, but when I asked the inevitable question, he said that word attack skills were picked up by students, mostly through the writing process.

In my quest for further enlightenment, I looked at the comments by Samuels and Kamil (1984) on the information processing perspective in the reading process. After commenting on Gough’s model, they state:

> The appearance of LaBerge and Samuels’s (1974) model emphasizing automaticity of component processes and Rumelhart’s interactive model (1977) emphasizing flexible processing and multiple information sources, depending upon contextual circumstances, provided convincing evidence that the information processing perspective was here to stay within the reading field.

The study of these and other models seemed to show an agreement that all levels of language are involved in the reading process, but contention is based on the degree of focus in any one area. To those of us who are engaged in literacy instruction, the practical issue is not on the necessity of graphophones, syntax and meaning for the reading process, but on where and how to begin to break the code into literacy. (1992). Notes on Literacy, 18(3).
Roger Shuy (1977) states, “It is my position, in fact, that learning to read involves both the mundane behavior skills stressed by traditional reading programs and the cognitive processes argued for by Goodman and Smith.” This led me to the model I have developed for the Papua New Guinea context. Shuy’s model is linear, with progress through the stages of reading—from letter-sound correspondence to pragmatic context.

I argued that if both behavior skills and cognitive processes were necessary, why not start with both at the onset of reading? Why not call on the instructional methods of the whole language approach for the linguistic and pragmatic contexts, and the more traditional methods of instruction for the letter-sound correspondence?

Cambourne (1979:83) states, “The point is that there are distinctly different theoretical approaches to the reading process which lead to quite different teaching strategies and instructional materials.” Teaching strategies and materials for breaking into literacy through a more holistic approach are different from those used for an approach that focuses on the elements below the word level. The model that shows most clearly the division into two tracks of the Multistrategy method is the model showing major cue systems used in reading (Smith 1976).

![Figure 1 Major cue systems used in reading](image)

In this model, integration takes place between cues found within words, within language, and within readers. For instructional purposes, it seemed logical to separate learning of the elements below the word level from learning the cognitive processes of reading found in higher levels because of the different instructional techniques and materials needed. Given the constraints of low educational standards and the
need for teacher training, this division into two separate tracks fits the sociocultural context in which we have to work in many developing countries.

2.3. The sociocultural context

I sought to develop a method with consideration of pragmatic, sociological and psychological influences experienced in the cultural context. For pragmatic reasons, it was necessary to formulate strategies that:

1. Could be presented in short, group oriented training courses for teachers
2. Teachers could handle innovatively after understanding the basic principles
3. Fit into a simple, straightforward structure
4. Require a minimum of daily preparation and making of aids such as books, charts, and flash cards on which each lesson would depend

In the sociological area, the method needed to allow:

1. Teachers to have status and responsibility in their respective areas
2. Teachers to work together without competing
3. Group participation and peer teaching and learning

In the psychological area:

1. Teachers needed to be confident in their respective areas of responsibility.
2. Students needed an opportunity to be in charge of their own learning for a positive introduction to literacy to be generated.

In an attempt to make a literacy program culturally appropriate and acceptable, I developed a two track model (Stringer 1988) with both tracks involving all levels of the reading and writing processes, but with separate and distinctive emphases. One emphasis was holistic, meaningful learning with understanding of how to listen, think, talk, read, and write for meaning. The other emphasis was analytic step-by-step learning of syllables and letters in a context of learning to know, build, read, and write the form. Teachers were given training in both areas, but each person specialized and became the teacher for one track, according to his or her preferred teaching and learning style. The dichotomy of holistic-analytic fits the cognitive learning styles of Field Independent-Field Dependent thinking (Davis 1991).

3. Multistrategy method: How?

3.1. A trial

trial, students were divided into two groups and taught concurrently by two different teachers, each trained to teach from a particular perspective. One taught from whole, meaningful units of prose, and the other taught from specific elements within words. I called the first approach *Reading to write*, with more emphasis placed on natural, expressive, meaningful reading and writing. I called the second approach *Writing to read*, where spelling and accurate reading and writing of the smaller elements were in focus. The students changed classrooms to be exposed to instruction from each teacher for one hour each morning.

For comparative purposes, two schools were exposed only to the *Writing to read* approach, one school to the *Reading to write* approach, and two schools to both approaches. The highlight of this initial trial was the individual, spontaneous creative writing produced by children exposed to both approaches. The children were uninhibited and put their thoughts into print with confidence, at first with inaccurate form, but with growing accuracy as they integrated the skills learned in the *Writing to read* period of instruction. Each student proceeded at his or her own pace, was in control of the learning process, and grasped the procedures as he or she was cognitively ready.

### 3.2. The model

The success of this trial (Stringer 1987b), prompted the writing of *Working together for literacy* (Stringer and Faracas 1987). The book is a guide, written to help second language speakers of English to grasp the basic elements and set up a literacy program in their own languages, from an initial survey, through teacher training, and on to ongoing classes for fluent readers and creative writers. The method was refined to clearly describe all the basic elements needed in a successful literacy program (Figure 2).

![Figure 2 The Two-Track model of the Multistrategy method](image)
In the Story Track, the role of the teacher is to set the stage and give the students plenty of opportunity to interact with print, to create a print environment in which students can learn to express themselves in creative language and acquire the process of how to read and write by participating in meaningful reading and writing. The role of the student is to think, understand and create, always with the emphasis on meaning and comprehension. The teacher chooses the cultural theme for the week (a picturable item: people, animals, or objects) and relevant story books. However, students’ participation determines the content of the lessons. They participate in an experience (an emotive, story-generating activity about the cultural theme), generate the story for the wall chart, listen to and discuss a story, choose a story to read for reading alone, read the Shared Book with the teacher, and write a creative story on the theme.

In the Workbook Track the role of the teacher is to teach particular skills perceived to be necessary for learning to read and write. The role of the student is to use his or her eyes, ears, and hands to perfect each skill with emphasis on accuracy of form. The teacher structures each lesson and controls the content so students can learn discrete skills step-by-step. The students learn how to recognize syllables through analysis and synthesis of words, how to recognize words in sentences, and how to write by forming letters and spelling correctly. All the instructional material is culturally appropriate and meaningful, but more emphasis is on form than on meaning.

The terms reading acquisition and reading learning come from Sheridan (1986:500–501) who states that people use reading acquisition “to satisfy inner needs to understand meaning” and thereby teach themselves about reading. In contrast, “reading learning is usually taught to us and focuses more on form (sound-symbol relationships, decoding, correct pronunciation) and less on meaning.”

In each track there is ample latitude for the interdependent and interactive aspects of the systems of language, that is, semantics, syntax, and graphophonics, to take place in the mind of each individual student, but the degree of emphasis in each area is different. In the Story Track, more emphasis is placed on the meaning and structure, while in the Workbook Track graphophonics and spelling are emphasized. The simplicity of the model lies in that the student is in control of acquiring and learning in natural contexts and the teacher is not expected to weave together the different aspects in contrived settings to facilitate learning.

4. Highlights from practical applications

4.1. Vernacular prep schools for children

In the prep-school program in the Enga Province (Stringer 1987b, 1990) the enthusiasm of teachers, children, and parents was significant. After a three-week writers’ workshop to prepare materials, teachers were trained in method for three weeks where they chose the approach they preferred to use. In schools where both approaches were taught, the two teachers cooperated well, taking control of both classes when one, or the other, was absent. Each teacher had a separate classroom where he or she was in control and responsible for half the students in a full curriculum each morning. Parents cooperated by looking after the school and the grounds each week, as well as taking time to teach in the weekly culture session. The children were particularly enthusiastic about the holistic approach. In one school, in the early stages of the...
program, some children tried surreptitiously many times to leave their workbook classroom and join the other group after the roll had been called.

The most outstanding feature of the Enga program was the advances made in writing creatively. By the end of the year, some children were writing stories of up to thirty words, with few errors, in a 15-minute period. In most instances, poor spelling occurred where the orthography was inadequate. In one school, a number of children could write with more accuracy than they could read. Figures 3 and 4 give examples of writing achievement at approximately 22 and 30 weeks respectively.

Figure 3 Writing example at 22 weeks: responding to a capital letter, word breaks, and good spelling
Figure 4 Writing example at 30 weeks: more motor control and correct spelling

At this stage, crayons and chalk were still used for writing, due to a lack of pencils. In the Grade 1 Experimental class, children wrote long, creative stories and made their own books.

4.2. Adult literacy classes

In 1990, an adult literacy program was set up in four villages in the Urat language in Papua New Guinea. Teachers were trained and materials prepared in a four-week workshop. After a pretest to determine the degree of literacy contact of the students, classes began with two teachers per school, except for one experimental school where one teacher taught both tracks. Classes were held for 25 weeks, five days a week, with one week off after four weeks of teaching.

Sociological factors hampered classes in two villages. These had little community support, teachers came from outside villages, and classes were crowded in a single classroom where the teachers taught consecutively. The classes in the other two villages made very good progress, with regular attendance and continued enthusiasm, especially in the village that had two classrooms and two teachers, each teaching separate tracks.

In this latter village, thirty three students completed the program. Thirteen had been exposed previously to some literacy in the lingua franca or English for short periods. This group became quite fluent and confident readers and writers. Of the preliterate group, 12 achieved literacy and are perfecting their skills in ongoing classes, while the remainders were hampered by problems like old age.

As in the Enga program, the highlight of the Urat program was the spontaneous, self-generated story writing. The language is complex phonologically with a number of morphophonemic changes. These complexities hampered both reading and writing. The literacy program prompted orthography changes to facilitate literacy in Urat.
4.3. Pertinent factors for Multistrategy method (MSM) literacy

Some important literacy principles have been reemphasized and new insights gained as a result of the practical application of my ideas. One important insight is that national teachers, after limited training, can grasp the underlying principles, make them their own with innovative teaching techniques, and bring people through to literacy. Below are some comments related to adult literacy using MSM:

1. The division into two tracks is important. This dichotomy fits the Field Dependent-Field Independent cognitive learning style division. Much of the literature on holistic and analytic learning styles and education, particularly holistic instruction is relevant (Davis 1991). The MSM caters to both types of students by separating the material and style of teaching. Teachers choose the style that is most natural to them, and there is no burden on each teacher to cultivate and bring both teaching styles into focus in the classroom. Students have the opportunity to draw on the learning style that fits them best and, at the same time, learn to understand and develop the other style. In the Urat program, there was noticeable confusion where both tracks were taught by one teacher. The separation helps teachers and students to know what is expected of them, and they can tackle each session without confusion.

2. Students with preferred holistic learning styles tend to pursue one thought, action, or investigation through to completion. Therefore, in the Story Track, it is important for teachers to encourage students to be predictive, creative, and self-generating in each lesson. Meaning must take precedence. Practically, this means that teachers should foster creativity and not allow students to mimic someone else when reading, not allow students to copy when writing, not tell students what to write, and not correct spelling and reading mistakes.

Sheridan (1986:501) reiterates this point by saying, “Perhaps the greatest mistake a teacher can make is to interrupt reading acquisition with reading learning. It is important to remember that during reading acquisition the reader is focusing on meaning (that is, is reading for meaning).” Insisting on creative writing without focusing on spelling from the outset is more difficult to achieve with adults than with children. In the Urat program, there was more creative spontaneity and accuracy.
in story writing in the class where the Story Track teacher did not allow copying than in any of the other classes.

3. When teaching elements below the word level, different thinking patterns and instructional techniques are in focus. Allowing students to grasp the requirements for spelling and attacking new words in an atmosphere where creativity is not demanded gives room for individual control in using this knowledge when creative writing and reading take place.

4. It is important that teachers understand the purpose for each lesson, and to make sure that students get the point. Presenting one thing after another without a set purpose brings confusion. In the MSM each particular lesson in each track builds into achieving one overall purpose. The method is planned so that there is no mixing of authority in performance of tasks, and teachers and students know where they are and what is expected of them. In the Urat program, teachers were quite explicit in informing the class of tasks and relationships.

5. Conclusion

Initial attempts to make literacy relevant and easy to achieve led to deeper study of literacy methods, traditional learning styles of the people of Papua New Guinea, the sociocultural context, and reading theory and practice. This study led to experimentation using a dual approach to teaching literacy. The method was refined and presented as the Multistrategy method.

At present, this Two-Track model is being used in many areas of Papua New Guinea with some variation in the patterns of the Workbook Track. Literacy workers who had material prepared for teaching a basic syllable approach are using these materials alongside the Story Track. Courses using the book *Working together for literacy* are being taught in the Capital and various centers around the country by the University of Papua New Guinea and the National Department of Education. After basic training in the model, nationals are setting up their own teacher training courses and literacy programs.

There are success stories. One national literacy worker, teaching in the lingua franca, said that his courses used to be for two years, but with the new approach, students are learning to read and write so quickly that the teachers do not know what to teach in the second year. We are encouraged in Papua New Guinea by people asking for training in many parts of the country as vernacular literacy has become valued in many societies. The National Policy of Education has also changed in favor of vernacular education in some form on all levels with children, out-of-school youth and adults.

The Multistrategy method is one of a number of models being used for literacy instruction in this upsurge of interest in vernacular education in Papua New Guinea. Whether it will prove to be a model that indigenous people can grasp, make their own, and use with success in different linguistic and cultural environments in other countries will need further research.

References


Citations


Citations


Citations


Citations


Page 13.

Citations


[View document](#)  See also [Stringer and Faraclas 1987b](#)  Bibliography (Literacy) Citations