Mass literacy programs

by John R. Watters

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1. General cultural factors conditioning literacy programs

It may be possible to classify cultures along certain parameters which condition the kinds of literacy activities that are possible in one community as opposed to another. The hypothesis that crystallized for me, assumes that there are at least three general conditions which play crucial roles in the development of mass literacy programs in a given society or culture. (Success in these programs would include both the community’s initial learning of literacy and numeracy skills, and its ultimate retention and use of those skills over the long term.)

The first condition has to do with the openness of the society to change and its desire to “better” its living conditions. What I have in mind here is the felt need of the given community to pursue some of the benefits of the modern, industrial state. These benefits may be in the areas of health, agriculture, education, communication, and so on. This might be called the developmental factor in literacy programs.

The second condition turns on the question of local leadership. In various cultures, the younger generation of leaders and entrepreneurs is still present at the local, village level. They have neither left for the city as uneducated poor in search of low-level jobs, nor have they been educated to such an extent that they are largely employed by the government in either high-level or middle-level jobs in urban centers. This condition might be called the leadership factor.

The third condition involves the homogeneity of the given community. The more homogeneous a given community is linguistically, culturally, geographically, politically, and religiously, the more chance there

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is for success in a mass literacy program in that community. This condition might be called the social cohesion factor.

Given these three different conditions, there could theoretically be eight different sociocultural situations in which teams might find themselves. We could treat these conditions as feature complexes in which the values would be treated as follows: homogeneous [+H], nonhomogeneous [-H], open to “development” [+D], closed to “development” [-D], youthful leadership at village level [+L], and youthful leadership not at village level [-L]. The eight possible situations would be:

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A ? B C no ? no D

However, of the eight possible situations, it appears that only four will probably be encountered: namely, Situations A, B, C, and D. This restriction is due to two redundancies. First, it is unlikely that a youthful leadership, even if present, would be able to promote mass literacy if the community is not homogeneous. Thus, [-H] implies [-L]. So, in effect, Situations 5 and 7 would not be found. Secondly, a community whose youthful leadership has basically left the villages is probably a community that is also open to development. Thus, [-L] implies [+D]. So, in effect, Situations 2 and 6 are unlikely to be encountered.

On the basis of these restrictions, the four different types of sociocultural situations would be A, B, C, and D. We might think of these linguistic communities along a scale of homogeneity, beginning at one end with those communities which are fairly self-sufficient and operating in and of themselves, to those which are disintegrating and whose members are being integrated into the larger national culture. We can begin with the first type of language community, that characterized as Situation A. These societies are (1990). Notes on Literacy, 61.
homogeneous and their youthful leadership is present at the village level. However, there is no clear indication that they are open to or desiring change in their society. For an SIL team to work in such a group, especially with those who are nomadic, it would seem that the only kind of literacy program that could be pursued would be basically a one-on-one type of program. There may be individuals in the community that are open to change, but it is unlikely that there will be any mass movement toward literacy.

The second type of language community, represented by Situation B, is the community which meets all three conditions: the community is open to change, their youthful leadership is present, and they are still a homogeneous society. Many languages in north Cameroon and in Chad fall within this type of situation. Also, from what I can gather concerning the successful programs in northern Ghana and the successful program carried on by Uwe Gustafsson in India, these conditions have all been met and contribute significantly to the success these programs have experienced.

For the third category of language community, represented by Situation C, the conditions are less clearly met than in the case of Situation B. The community is not only open to change, but already well into the process of change. But it has gotten to that point largely through the use of oral communication, not through literacy. Even in community activities where written communication is used, a trade or national language usually already occupies the domain provided by that activity, making the use of the local language in that domain difficult (but not necessarily impossible). In addition, the youthful leadership of the community has basically left the village for the urban centers. Their young elite are generally well-educated and have important leadership roles at the national and regional levels, rather than at the village level. For this reason, these communities lack the necessary local leadership to take the initiative in a mass literacy program. Instead, it would be my hypothesis that the best type of literacy program in these cases would be one which focused on specialized interest groups such as churches, cultural associations, cooperatives, and so forth. Thus, whereas in Situation B mass literacy is clearly indicated, in Situation C mass literacy is generally counterindicated.

Finally, the fourth type of language community is what we may call Situation D. In such a community, not only have they gone beyond Situation C in terms of change and loss of leadership, but also they have lost a great deal of their homogeneity as a language community. In many cases, the individual members of the community have adopted a second language and are well on the way to being integrated into the larger national community or a larger neighboring linguistic community. In these cases, implementing a literacy program is highly questionable and at best involves a program for either specialized groups or for isolated individuals. In the most extreme cases, there would be serious questions as to the viability of the language into the next generation.

2. Implications of these factors for our language teams

If this hypothesis concerning language communities and their readiness for literacy is correct, then I believe it is crucial to communicate this to our SIL teams. Professor Cairns’ basic experience is in the area of mass literacy campaigns which are heavily sponsored and subsidized by national governments. In (1990). Notes on Literacy, 61.

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SIL, our members are not involved as a general rule in such literacy programs. In Cameroon, many of our teams are involved in language communities of Situation C, in which literacy as a mass movement may never come about. The optimal conditions for such a mass movement may have passed and may never be met again. Such teams should be encouraged to do all they can within the context in which they find themselves. On the other hand, we need to encourage the teams in contexts where these conditions are met. They have more of the possibilities available to see a mass literacy campaign or program implemented. So this hypothesis has implications for how we might allocate resources, both human and material.

Another implication concerns team morale. Teams should not compare their programs with other programs and, therefore, inappropriately become discouraged or overly elated at their success. Teams should be supportive of one another and try to understand the unique context in which each team works in terms of motivating literacy. I believe that some teams could be extremely discouraged about the limited success they have seen. Yet, if we look at the broader picture, we may see that the successes they have had are indeed significant successes given the conditions under which they work. As Professor Cairns said, again thinking of mass literacy, “it should not be necessary for the language team to preach at the people about getting involved in a literacy program.” If the community is not ready, it cannot be forced into readiness.

3. Addendum: Further notes from Watters as a result of his visit with Professor Cairns

There are certain crucial factors for success in a mass literacy program. These include

- at least some informal institutional support
- a local promoter
- a team to provide organizational, administrative, and material help
- monitoring motivational levels and areas
- keeping careful classroom records on individual students, and
- numeracy is as important as literacy in any campaign and should be included.

The postliteracy phase is crucial to the overall success of the program because of the always present problem of literacy regression. Without a postliteracy phase, the literacy phase is often useless. The goal is to strengthen the literacy context so as to maintain literacy. Some actions that may be taken to maintain literacy include

- small village newspapers with current information (these may be handwritten or typed, single sheets written on only one side, and so forth; in other words, simple)
- small libraries where readers may borrow books
- reading clubs and writing clubs might also be developed, and


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in any program, a newsletter for teachers is helpful, even if there are only 20 teachers involved in the program. Such a newsletter like *Teachers’ tips* builds both morale and professionalism among the teaching corps.

Professor Cairns suggested that five to 600 contact hours are required before a student who was initially illiterate can be considered “literate.” Only at that point can the student be considered to have entered the postliteracy phase.

Language Committees should be spontaneous, locally motivated structures and structured within the traditional society, rather than “new” externally imposed structures.

As much as possible, a literacy program should be tied into some development activity or recognized, functioning institution. The teaching of content should be made at least as important as the teaching of the symbols.