

The Koriki Literacy Project - Phonics Training Workshops

Robbie Petterson, March 2017

In May and June 2016 teacher training workshops were held at Kairimai and Kinipo villages in the Koriki speaking area of the Gulf Province of PNG. They were held for two main purposes:

- (1) to train teachers to teach Koriki language literacy in an effort to reverse a serious trend towards illiteracy in schools that has resulted from a misguided focus on English-only literacy in villages where English is a foreign language;
- (2) to support the new Standards Based Curriculum (SBC) emphasis on Phonics for both Language and English syllabuses.

There are also scientific interests in this project:

- (3) Neurolinguists in the University of California in San Francisco (UCSF) are interested in studying what happens when children begin to learn to read in societies where there is little exposure to literacy before school;
- (4) The Uniskript Research and Literacy Institute (URLI) is interested in researching the difference between introducing literacy with an arbitrary symbol system (Roman letters) and an iconic symbol system (Uniskript).

At the Kairimai workshop the focus was on training teachers to teach Koriki literacy using Uniskript, a non-Roman alphabet with symbols which are icons of the vocal apparatus and various phonological features. At Kinipo the focus was on training to teach using the normal Roman alphabet. We are hoping to compare the two systems of teaching literacy.

Background

The Koriki language was one of the first two languages in Papua New Guinea to get a Uniskript alphabet. The alphabet development took place at the University of the Nations in Hawai'i in July 2013. Later back in PNG the alphabet was tried out at Kapuna Life School and at a small "grass-roots" school at Akoma in 2013.

At Kapuna the year 2 children had a trained teacher, and had already just started learning to read, using English; they picked up Koriki Uniskript very quickly (in about two weeks), and their teacher often gave them story-writing practice in it. There were also four children in a year 3 class who were struggling to learn to read English. We gave them an hour a day of coaching in Koriki Uniskript for 3 weeks, and at the end of that time they had started to read Koriki Uniskript; moreover their English reading also had improved noticeably. Afterwards they went on to do well in normal classes.

The school at Akoma failed because the volunteer teacher there did not receive sufficient training in how to teach, and apparently there was some jealousy on the part of the Elementary School teacher in the village.

When people noticed our growing interest in literacy as a result of our extensive literacy survey work, and also the Uniskript training, we started getting letters and visits from people who wanted to do something about the literacy levels in their

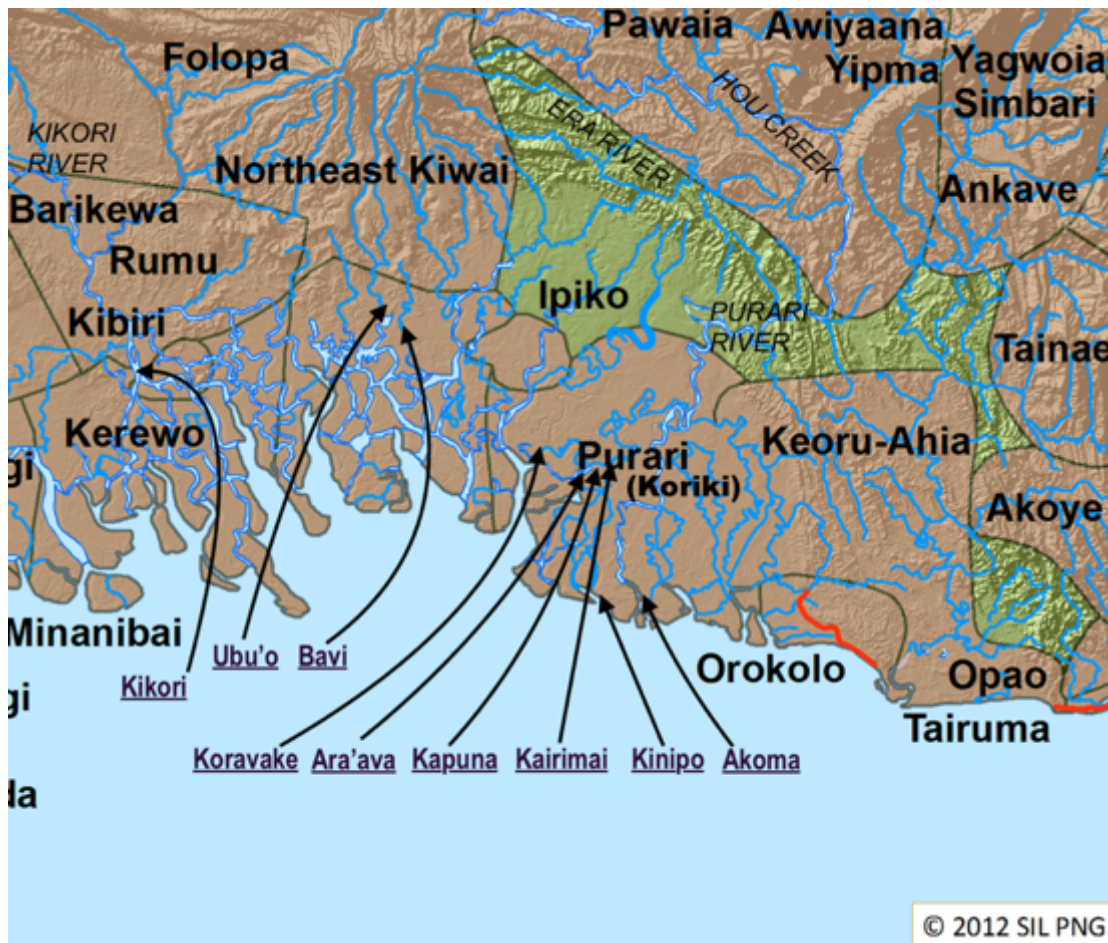


Figure 1. Language and village location map

communities by getting training as volunteer teachers, so we sensed a new door was opening for us.

In the summer of 2013/2014 we trained seven volunteer teachers to teach Koriki literacy with Uniskript at a holiday school for 127 children at Ara'ava village for four and a half weeks. (Uniskript was a very new idea, so Education staff were not yet interested in being involved.) The older primary school children learnt the system very quickly (in 2 weeks), and the younger ones learnt to various degrees, with the youngest ones (5 year olds) learning only a few letters and their sounds. Afterwards all of the trainee teachers started teaching classes. At Ara'ava the four volunteer teachers met with some discouragement and did not persist. At Kai'alavi one teacher started a small school and taught throughout the year, ending up with most of the children able to read Koriki and some able to read English. At Kairimai two teachers assisted the elementary teacher with daily 30 minute sessions given for Uniskript literacy. Some of the children learnt to read, but not as well as those at Kai'alavi where the whole focus was on literacy. At Kapuna we assisted another new-entrants teacher to use Uniskript, and there was good success. The success of this school at the National Literacy Week celebrations at Koravake attracted the attention and interest of provincial-level staff of the Department of Education, and there was a proposal to include Uniskript training at a phonics workshop later that year, but there were funding difficulties and it did not eventuate.

The following year, 2015, our focus turned to helping other tribes, with training workshops for the Northeast Kiwai languages, and for the elementary school at Kikori, and I started developing a teaching handbook. A kindergarten in Ubu'o village was particularly successful, with many children learning to read, and this attracted a lot of attention locally.

Meantime the Koriki teachers either struggled along or dropped out due to lack of community support. However, a visit from a team from URLI in October stirred up interest again, and in early 2016 we were invited to take part in a one-week phonics workshop at Bavi (near Ubu'o), organised by a local Department of Education trainer, for the Northeast Kiwai language "cluster". Other Department of Education officers became interested, and asked for copies of our training materials, so after the workshop I made those copies and sent them around.

After the Bavi workshop we arranged to start a larger literacy teacher training program for the Koriki language group, with courses to be held at Kairimai and Kinipo to which Department of Education staff were invited.

Timetable

I drew up a timetable for these workshops based on what we had used at the Bavi phonics workshop in April, except that I saw that one week was not enough to get teachers trained to competency in literacy, so I made it for two weeks, with basic teaching and demonstration classes in the first week, and real teaching practice with small groups of elementary school children along with material production in the second week.

Phonics Lessons

I had made some improvements to the phonics course book used at Bavi, and this became the basis for teaching. I used ideas from many sources, especially Creative Phonics and the new Standards Based Language and English Syllabuses, with the focus on initial local language literacy. I also included training in English pronunciation, because Elementary and even Primary teachers speak a very simplified English, which does not match well what their training materials expect them to teach. Because the course was two weeks long there was much more time for trainees to practice in small groups with each other, and also with children.

During the courses we covered these topics: how children learn, phonemes and allophones, graphemes, the vocal tract, hand signs plus iconic Uniskript representations of phoneme production in the vocal tract, the stages of learning to read, testing and assessment, the steps to take in teaching a new phoneme/letter, special techniques for teaching phonemic awareness, the phoneme-symbol connection, blending and segmentation, the steps to take in teaching to write and read a story, how to make a class library book by hand, making and using a syllable chart, English phonemes, English phonics, English Uniskript.

Over both courses we developed a basic teaching plan, and the teachers made their own flash cards for teaching letters and key words with matching pictures. We also developed a series of decodable stories, and they made copies of these for themselves, each very simply and cost-free on a single sheet of folded paper (as taught in Creative Phonics).

For teaching practice we had elementary age children come in every day for demonstration classes in week 1, and small group practice classes in week 2. The trainees practised teaching phonemic awareness, new symbols, blending, and segmentation. We found that many of the Koriki children could be taught to blend fairly quickly, even on the first day with vowel-only words. This is a major milestone in early literacy which many trained teachers in our area fail to achieve!

Already trained teachers helped different groups, and then concentrated on helping to teach a few children who we found were slow learners. We also discovered how we could modify the sequencing of lessons to make teaching easier and more efficient for the children.

Trainee test results and certification

At both workshops I gave a practice test at the end of week one, and a proper test at the end of week 2. The test results confirmed that a trainee who has attained grade 10 is much easier to train than one who has only grade 6. Test results and observations show that some people have a gift for teaching that is easy to develop, while others need much more guidance, or else probably should not teach.

Each trainee received a small certificate of attendance that also showed percentages for days attended, Uniskript symbol knowledge, Koriki language spelling ability, and phonics theory. The certificate also contained a recommendation for the future in order to become a good teacher.

Our plan is to later issue larger "Certificates of Teaching Practise" for trainees who start classes, stay on the job for the year, and have measurable success at teaching their students to read.

Sustainability and Funding

It is intended that this project be sustainable, that is, (1) that teachers will see how well phonics methods work, and how well initial literacy in the local language works, giving communities and educationalists good evidence to support the continuation of this approach; and (2) volunteer teachers who are successful will be supported by parents (and other stakeholders). Therefore support for volunteer teachers is being sought from the parents of the children they teach, sometimes as money, but mostly in kind.

Outside funding, if we can obtain it, will be for trainer travel, and to meet special infra-structure needs, such as blackboards, solar lighting systems, and mobile phones for teachers, and a printing machine for making literacy materials in a timely manner.

(Meantime we are going ahead with the project without outside funding.)



Figure 2. Trainees practising with children at Kinipo

The Kairimai Workshop

This workshop ran from May 10 to May 20, and was organised by Ipai 'Omaro and his team. We held the training in the large church hall. Participants contributed a small amount of money, and local women brought food for the participants to eat at lunch time.

The main focus of the Kairimai workshop was training to teach children or adults to read in Koriki language using Uniskript.

Participants

There were 20 participants, including four elementary school teachers (two from Ara'ava and two from Kairimai) and a retired primary school teacher. Two of the teachers trained in Uniskript in 2013 also took part, and were very helpful in assisting the new trainees.

The primary school teachers at Ara'ava had also expressed a keen interest in attending in the afternoons to learn about English phonics, but they did not show up.

Training

I taught the material in the course book, and everyone took part in developing decodable word lists according to a useful sequence of letters, although we did not complete this task at this workshop. From the wordlists participants devised short decodable stories, which they then wrote out in Uniskript in simple book form with illustrations. They also made letter and word flash cards in Uniskript.

For teaching practice we had first year elementary school children come in every day of week 2, and divided them into 6 groups with 3 teacher trainees per group for an hour. Both teachers and children became very enthusiastic, and we sometimes struggled to bring the practice classes to a halt.

Trainee test results

Observation and testing showed that there are three previously trained teachers who can teach, and help train others to teach. Two new trainees should be able to start their own classes right away with a reasonable hope of success.

The other 15 trainees needed to develop Koriki language spelling skills before they start teaching. For five of the trainees this will probably be fairly easy; the remaining ten have some difficulty segmenting language words into phonemes, and I think they will need further training in this skill (e.g. a Writers' Workshop) before they will be capable of teaching literacy (whether Koriki or English) without confusing their students. (This group includes two of the present elementary teachers!)

I think that the difficulty some participants had in segmenting and spelling could be because when they themselves learnt to read as children they were taught using spelling memorisation rather than phonics methods, and also in their elementary teacher training they were never taught to teach using phonics methods.

A further benefit of the course was that many of the children in the practice classes made advances in literacy, and some started reading books they had never seen before - books made during the course.

The Kinipo Workshop

This workshop ran from June 6 to June 20, and was organised by Eddie Rurupu and his team, and led by myself with assistance from two teachers from Kairimai. We held the training for the first week in the church hall at Kinipo, but then shifted to the school in the second week because a funeral was being held in the house next to the church. Participants went back to their houses for lunch, and those from other villages contributed to their host families by their own private arrangements.

The main focus of the Kinipo workshop was training to teach children or adults to read in Koriki language using Roman letters (rather than Uniskript).

Participants

There were 20 participants, 14 being from Kinipo, plus two each from the other Koriki villages, Ikinu and Akoma, and two from a nearby Kaimare village, Varia. (Koriki and Kaimare languages have a lot in common.) Although a primary school teacher and elementary school teacher from Kinipo attended, it was disappointing that the elementary teachers from Varia, Akoma and Ikinu missed this good opportunity for training in phonics, given that their success at teaching literacy is pretty dismal, and given that training in phonics is part of the plan for the Standards Based Curriculum "rollout".

Training Team

I was the team leader, and also brought along Sergious Vai'i (an experienced elementary teacher), and Aukiri Paimuru (an experienced volunteer teacher), both of whom had taken part in the Kairimai workshop.

Training

We followed the same course material as at Kairimai, but I gave Sergious and Aukiri opportunities to teach some of it, as I hope they will become future trainers.

At this workshop we quickly went over the word lists and decodable stories that the Kairimai participants had put together, and then moved on to complete their work for the rest of the alphabet.

As at Kairimai, participants made their own flash cards and story books, but this time in Roman letters.

For teaching practice we had about 20 children come in every day of week 2, and divided them into 6 groups with 3 teacher trainees per group for an hour. (We had done some initial testing of the participants, and so we evenly distributed into each group those who did well and not so well.) The trainees practised teaching phonemic awareness, new letters, and blending. As at Kairimai, we found that many of the Koriki children could be taught to blend fairly quickly, starting on the first day with vowel-only words.

Trainee test results

As at Kairimai, test results and observations show that some people have a gift for teaching that is easy to develop, while others need much more guidance – official elementary school teachers included.

The tests also showed that efficient Roman letter orthographies for Koriki and Kaimare have not been taught for a long time, and spelling abilities needed honing, especially remembering to write the glottal stop consistently.

The test results indicate that six of the twenty participants have the ability to start a class straight away, but one will need to work with a Koriki speaker as she does not speak the language well; another six will be able to teach after practising spelling and writing a bit more, and could work in teams; the other eight will need further training, and should work as assistant teachers in the meantime. (One trainee must have learnt to spell only by rote memorisation, and even after two weeks of training could not yet spell phonetically.)



Figure 3. Workshop participants - Kinipo (above), Kairimai (below)



Recommendations for the future

The two-week training course format is much better than a one-week format, in that it gave enough time to allow all trainees to try their hand at teaching children; many trainees, however, will need longer training than that.

Koriki (and Kaimare) have very simple sound systems, and teaching just 12 basic letters is enough to read all words except foreign borrowings. Languages with larger numbers of letters to cover would probably need a longer workshop, if teaching materials were being developed in the workshop.

For a multiple language training workshop, I would recommend developing teaching plans and materials in separate writers' workshops for each language before the training workshop. If orthographies have not been developed, then they need to be developed in separate workshops first of all, ahead of any other workshop.

A collage of pictures taken at the workshop



Figure 4. Scenes from the Kairimai workshop