Factors affecting community literacy programs

Assessment and response

by Barbara L. Trudell

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Originally published as:


[Topics: assessment, community-based literacy programs]

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Abstract

This article was presented as a paper at the Oxford International Conference on Education and Development, held in Oxford, UK on 19–21 September 2001. The goal of the paper was to provide the audience (largely educators, specialists in international development, and representatives of donor agencies) with some idea of SIL’s practices and priorities in literacy.

1. Introduction

Although personnel in SIL-associated literacy programs do not often engage in formal program evaluation, they do a great deal of informal program assessment. SIL’s decentralized administrative structure allows community-level literacy workers a great deal of latitude in shaping the local program. Their local experience is also a valued resource in shaping organizational policy. Therefore, assessment done by literacy program practitioners has significant impact on SIL program practice and policy at both Spaeth, C. (2001). NOL 27.3 (2001).
local and national levels. Assessment and analysis of the impact of various factors in a language program is a regular part of SIL-associated programs, in the form of yearly reviews of strategies and implementation. [All the examples referred to in this article come from sub-Saharan Africa. In the context of the presentation, it was made clear Africa is where most of my own personal experience has been; however, there was no intimation that SIL’s literacy work is limited to that continent.]

1.1. Factors

Certain factors are often found to have significant impact on a community literacy program—significant enough to induce changes in program direction and implementation.

1.1.1. Orthography

Does one exist in the target language? Is it easy to use? Is it well accepted by the local speakers?

Example: The Naro language of Botswana is distinguished by having 28 phonemic clicks. Devising an alphabet for Naro speakers to use has been a challenge. After various attempts had been made by outsiders (including SIL) to develop an alphabet, it became clear that in order for progress to be made the Naro themselves must be part of the decision making process. So in October 1997, interested parties including government and university representatives, SIL personnel, and Naro leaders, met in D’Kar, Botswana for a workshop on the Naro orthography. Thorough discussions led to adoption of a proposed orthography for the Naro language. The discussions also brought out a strong sense of ownership and commitment by the Naro speakers to the orthography and to their language.

1.1.2. Partners and their goals

SIL’s partners in literacy include local communities, governments, funding agencies, church bodies, and other NGOs. Over the years, trends have become clear in those partners’ interests: mother tongue education, women and development, language and culture preservation, to name a few. As partners’ priorities emerge, they have an impact on SIL’s program planning, at both local and national levels.

Example: In Mozambique, the government education research arm, the Instituto Nacional do Desenvolvimento de Educação (INDE) has been developing mother tongue education programs over the past decade for minority languages of Mozambique. INDE has long been a key partner of SIL in Mozambique; therefore, SIL’s local programs personnel have modified their program goals and activities to support this education initiative, serving as resource personnel in linguistics, local languages, and mother tongue education.

Example: In northern Togo, SIL-backed literacy efforts among the Kabiye people have led to the establishment of a rural literacy and development program for women, called AFASA (Association des Femmes pour l’Alphabétisation, la Santé et les Activités Génératrices de Revenus). As Kabiye women and men became literate, it became clear that the will and the potential exist to address serious local issues of nutrition and agriculture as well as literacy. AFASA was conceptualized and established about

seven years ago, with the help of SIL personnel and funds. It is flourishing now, with Kabiyè women taking responsibility for all aspects of the program.

**Example:** Funding agency partners’ priorities invariably include assessment. When local-language literacy programs request significant financial help from an agency, therefore, one requirement of that partnership is rigorous and formal assessment. In Ghana, the burgeoning mother tongue literacy program run by the Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation (GILLBT) over the past few decades (between 20,000 and 40,000 adults from 27 language groups in class each year) led GILLBT to apply to agencies like the Department for International Development (DfID), the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and Evangelische Zentralstelle für Entwicklungshilfe (EZE) for financial aid. The conditions of those agencies’ participation in this literacy program have included meticulous record keeping and regular outside evaluation; such activities have been time-consuming at times, but they have brought greater accountability and efficiency to the program as well.

### 1.1.3. Political stability

Not surprisingly, civil conflict has significant impact on SIL-associated literacy programs. Great flexibility and adaptability are required of any program taking place in an unstable area.

Example: In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, civil war and rebel activity across the north and east of the country have truncated a number of SIL-associated literacy and training efforts. Expatriates cannot live in-country; cross-country travel is very dangerous for Congolese. As a result, strategies involving the establishment of local mother tongue literacy programs by expatriates have been discarded, giving way to strategies for long-distance training of Congolese colleagues and creative resource management.

### 1.1.4. The extent of community willingness to take ownership of the literacy program

**Example:** In the Atacora region of Benín, an association of seven language committees has established a center for literacy training and local-language literature production. In 1996 the Association Coopérative des Commissions Linguistiques de la Zone nord-ouest de l’Atacora (ACCLZNOA) was formed by six language commissions (Nateni, Waama, Biali, Fulfuldé, Ditammari, and Mbèlimè) to establish and manage this center. In 1999, the Centre de Production des Documents en Langues Nationales (CPDLN) was officially dedicated. The Gangam language commission joined ACCLZNOA in 1999.

Early on in this initiative, it became clear that the association was both motivated and knowledgeable about acquiring needed resources. The request made of SIL was for literacy consultants and trainers. SIL’s part in this initiative has thus been to prioritize assignment of literacy personnel to meet the request, at the cost of other potential or active literacy programs elsewhere.

### 1.1.5. Content of materials: What do the people want to read?

Examples of local-language materials produced in 2000, responding to audience interest:

• Calendars and agenda books in the Cerma, Dagara, Dogosé, Mooré, San, and Turka languages of Burkina Faso
• Collections of locally-produced creative writing in the Fulfuldé and Minyanka languages of Mali
• Materials to help French literates learn to read in their own local language, in the Jola-Kasa, Lehar, Ndut, and Noon languages of Senegal
• Booklets on health topics in the Giryama and Tharaka languages of Kenya
• Instruction materials for both Lingala and French as second languages, for the Ngbaka people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo
• Biblical parables in the Mekaa and Mundani languages of Cameroon.

1.1.6. The nature of outside input, given the local context

The placement of trained literacy specialists in communities whose language is mostly undeveloped has resulted in a clear increase in literacy activity in those language areas: classes attended, local involvement in leadership, new partnerships formed. In other programs, however, the local language community has the expertise needed to run a literacy program itself. In this case, SIL’s role is a consultative one, generally not onsite.

Example: In Ghana, the goal of GILLBT (a Ghanaian SIL affiliate) is that each language program becomes completely independent. A few programs, such as BILFACU (Bimoba Literacy Farmers Cooperative Union), in the Bimoba language, have incorporated themselves as NGOs, and have taken on responsibility for all operations and fundraising. GILLBT encourages its literacy programs to reduce their dependence on GILLBT as soon as is feasible.

2. Observations

A. Informal literacy program assessment is locally effective because it is based on a good understanding of the program, and it results in modifications to the program. However, one big weakness of such informal assessment is that it does not permit the information that is gained to be shared widely; only those closest to the program are aware of it. The ideal would be to follow up informal assessment with periodic structured evaluation, both formative and summative. We have so much to learn that we cannot afford to lose the valuable insights gained by local program experience.

B. The local presence of literacy program organizers in the community is important to promoting and implementing an effective literacy program. Such specialists can have substantial impact on the language community, especially if they are able to speak the language to some extent. Knowledgeable program planning, grassroots partnerships, effective use of resources, credibility, and program impact are all enhanced when such personnel are closely involved. When these resource personnel are not part of the local picture, it is generally much more difficult to achieve a significant impact on the population.

C. The trends and issues affecting our partners are very important to SIL. They have a substantial impact on how a given literacy program is shaped. Furthermore, it should be expected that as new partnerships form in the course of the program, the partners’ priorities are likely to cause some modification of program practices.

D. The history of a language’s development has significant impact on the shape of a local literacy program; for example, orthography, linguistic work done, language attitudes that have developed. As understanding of these powerful factors develops, the program must adapt to incorporate and address them.

E. Political and civil stability make a big difference in the likelihood of success and sustainability of a literacy program. Particularly in areas of potential instability, literacy program planners need to develop contingency strategies and be ready to flex as needed.

Reference


**Note:** This yearly document was begun in 1994, and compiles data from each of the approximately 20 sub-Saharan countries where SIL and its partners are active in literacy: publications done that year in each language; partnerships in the country, literacy classes and related training done that year by SIL or its partners; and other similar information.