

Adapting the Gudschinsky method to Sudanese languages

by Wanda Jane Pace

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1. Introduction

The goal of the Joint Literacy Project in Sudan has been to prepare beginning reading materials, in some of the major languages of the south, for use in the primary schools in the rural areas. We began in 1977, by using the Gudschinsky method to prepare trial primers in four languages which are not closely related in structure. After observation of classes using the books for at least one school year, and after teacher-training courses in all four of these languages, we have become aware of certain problems in strictly following the Gudschinsky method of teaching reading.

2. Problems encountered

Some problems we have met are *linguistic*:

- a. Some languages consist of many monosyllabic words, which means that the breaking-down and building-up drills are not necessary for the same reasons as for languages which have a majority of two-to-four syllable words and, thus, must be broken into syllables in order to focus on smaller parts.
- b. Content words of some languages have CVC syllable structure with internal vowel changes marking many grammatical functions. In such cases, nothing can be taught from a CV pattern, nor do such

(1989). *Notes on Literacy*, 60.

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patterns need much drilling. Furthermore, a word which may have been taught in isolation in a drill may require a vowel change in order to be used in a sentence in the story.

- c. Some languages have a number of homophonous words. This fact means that one cannot guarantee that the readers will think of the same meaning when they read the word in isolation as what they will need when they read it in the story which follows.
- d. We are working with eight or nine languages which have been written for close to 50 years and have the New Testament written in them, but which do not adequately mark vowel quality (advanced tongue root) and tone, in most cases. We cannot presume to make drastic changes in the orthographies at this point, so have to content ourselves with perhaps marking one or the other, but tolerating some remaining underdifferentiation, which fact again makes drilling of words in isolation problematic.

Other problems we face are related to *learning styles*:

- a. In general, the people tend not to think about units in isolation just for a mental challenge, but rather they want to think how everything they see or learn fits into an integrated whole. So, analysis and drilling of nonsense syllables or unrelated units is not something they find easy to do, nor do they see reason for doing it.
- b. The school system puts heavy emphasis on memorization through repetition, and we have found that teachers tend to squeeze our materials into their style, thus misusing both the drills and the story by teaching the learners to memorize them; thus, their intended teaching value is lost.

Other problems related to the schools include: short teaching year, no facilities available except the blackboard, and improbability of retraining all teachers to use the method effectively.

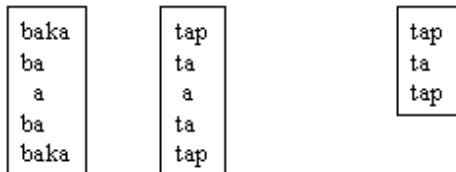
3. Changes suggested

We cannot claim to have found solutions to all the above kinds of problems, and other people would undoubtedly find different kinds of solutions. (For example, Ernie Lee treats most of the linguistic problems in his book on the Gudschinsky method.) But, what we have done may at least give other people a starting point to think of their own solutions. Below, I will categorize the changes we have made, and give our rationale for each kind of change.

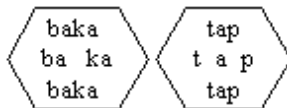
- 1. Cut down on the amount of drilling of nonsense or unrelated units. This strategy cuts down on one of the biggest offenders regarding learning style and an area badly abused by teachers who aim for memorization of all material. It also cuts out the most ambiguous parts for languages with underdifferentiation, homophones, and many monosyllabic words.
 - a. Box One (keyword analysis) may be kept the same, since it has the keyword to give a context for teaching the new item.
 - b. In some cases, two keywords with accompanying analysis boxes are used in place of Box Two, the analogy box (in which, traditionally, the new syllable occurs along with newly formed analogous syllables). Analogy is a fairly high-level analytical skill which probably cannot be
- (1989). *Notes on Literacy*, 60.

expected of even most children who are analytical thinkers, until at least age eight or later. We feel that it is more appropriately used in the latter half of the primer series than at the beginning, if the books are to be used with young children.

- c. No nonsense syllables are to be used in any boxes if the language is highly monosyllabic. This limitation means that Box Four (in which new syllables are compared with ones previously learned) may seldom have a full paradigm of nine syllables.
- d. Some people have combined Boxes One and Two in this manner:



- e. Some people have dropped Box Five (selected review list of new and familiar syllables) altogether, keeping only a list of words there. The teacher can employ word-attack methods, such as covering up all syllables (or letters) except the first, and uncovering them one by one.
- f. Others use an alternate type of word building, which starts with the whole word instead of a part.



Examples:

- 2. Add more context; this strategy fits better with the learning style of the people, and trains readers to develop the important reading skill of using context to help get meaning. This is an especially important skill for languages with underdifferentiation, homophones, and many monosyllabic words. Use of context also emphasizes the meaningfulness of reading.

- a. Make more use of pictures, by using two or more keywords as in Section 3, 1b above, by picturing new built words as well, or by illustrating an action in the story which requires the use of new words. The picture gives a better idea of what the unknown words might be.
- b. Add some reading exercises which force the use of context. One which we commonly use is a “fill-in-the-blank” sentence, with (two or) three choices of words following. Example:
John took his hoe and went to his _____.
(church, river, field)

Later on, one can make the choice between words phonetically similar in order to force focus on specific letters. Example: The old man walked with a _____.
(cane, care, case)

One language which has not marked tone and which also has some homophones puts a pair (or more) of sentences with a picture, and the readers decide which sentence best fits the picture.



The man saw a snake.

The man has a saw.

Two to four such exercises can fit on a page. Our experience is that readers respond to these kinds of exercises more enthusiastically than to syllable drills, since they are meaningful and require a more relational than analytical way of thinking.

3. Put more emphasis on the “story” or reading material and less on the drills of the teaching page. Our observation in school classrooms has often shown that a teacher will spend 30 minutes of a 40-minute period trying to teach the class to memorize the drills on the first page of the lesson, and spend only about 10 minutes going over the actual reading material and teaching the writing. To discourage this, we have divided each “lesson” into two periods, well marked in their teacher’s instructions for each lesson, and have reduced the number of drills on the teaching page to no more than three: Boxes One, Two, and Five in most cases. A Box Four type of drill (in which new syllables are compared with old syllables) could be used for review at the beginning of the second period.

The first period is composed of a very brief revision of something from the previous day, the drills of the teaching page and reading of the story with some comprehension questions. The second period is composed of a short drill or other reading exercise as a revision, more reading of the same story and some discussion questions (deeper than the basic comprehension questions of the previous period), and the writing. Covering the same story twice gives more emphasis to the main goal of learning to read, which is to read something which is meaningful and interesting, and in a large class (as is common in Sudan) it gives opportunity for more students to participate. If a teacher insists on repetition for memorization, it is better to do it on the meaningful materials than on a series of unrelated units!

4. Additional materials

Two other things which we have done and which do not fit into any of the categories above are

- to make an alphabet book to use as prereading material (and it also proves to be a popular motivational and public relations piece), and
- to use a sight-word story before actually beginning the primer lessons as such.

Following are more details on each.

The alphabet book was a result of popular demand from the teachers with whom we work. It has three pictures for each letter, with the name (handwritten, as they will see it on the blackboard) underneath each picture. The letter is printed at the top of the page. The teacher asks the pupils to find the same letter in each word (all of the words do not begin with the letter under focus—it can be anywhere in the word; for example, bat, cabin, and crib for *b*). (See attached sample page.) Ear-training drills can also be included in the teacher’s instructions. The pupils are taught to copy the letter for practice in using a pencil. A story

involving one of the picture items is read (for example, “Why bats fly only at night” for the letter *b*) and comprehension questions are asked on the story.

The use of meaningful and integrated material like this should be more easily understood (and, therefore, more effectively taught) as prereading activities than are differentiation drills involving shapes, letters, or syllables, and the copying of isolated shapes or letters. (Note that the pupils are not taught to sound out or read all the words under the pictures, but only to differentiate and recognize various letters within words which have meaning because of the pictures. My guess is that many children who are relational thinkers will memorize the whole words, however.) It may not be practical nor advisable to include all the letters of the alphabet as prereading material, but it may be good to prepare a separate alphabet book with all the letters (in alphabetical order, they insist in Sudan) for motivational and public relations purposes.

The sight-word story in the reading book takes the place of an experience chart in places where it is difficult to prepare and store separate charts. It is taught between the prereading activities of the alphabet book and the actual primer lessons themselves. Its purpose is to begin to acquaint the learners with connected and meaningful text, and to teach a dozen or more useful nouns (including probably one or two main characters for the primer stories), plus some productive verbs, location words, and perhaps some other words like adjectives or pronouns which can be used in the early primer stories. These would be used along with the few, new built words of each primer lesson, introduced in order to make more natural and varied reading material. Each page usually introduces one or two sight words under a picture. (In some of our languages, verbs must be introduced in the context of a sentence rather than as an isolated form under a picture.) Under the picture and words is a short text using the new words and other words previously taught. (See attached sample page .) Some teams use the method of slowly building up a longer story by adding a new line on each page. (The story will probably be more natural if it is composed as a whole unit and then broken down into picturable bits, rather than if it is composed one line at a time to fill the pages.) Others make a separate, although related, text for each page. Each approach has its pros and cons.

Some of us have put the sight-word story at the back of our public relations alphabet book and found it got a positive response from semiliterates or people literate in another language. They could go through the alphabet pages and then independently work their way through the sight-word story and conclude that reading their language is not so difficult after all!

In conclusion, what we have tried to do is to modify the analytical teaching method of the Gudschinsky approach to make it easier for teachers and pupils who are relational thinkers. Undoubtedly, we will make even further changes, perhaps some back again toward the direction from which we started, when we have had the opportunity to train more teachers in the use of the new books and to observe their use in classroom situations.

(Sample pages from the alphabet book, the sight-word story book and the primer follow.)

Sample Alphabet Book Page

k



kur



kil



thôk

Sample Sight-Word Story Page



Jôn aci wel dôm. *
dôm

Jôn aci wel cop. *
Jôn aci wel dôm.

* dog has fowl caught

* dog has fowl chased

Sample Teaching Page of Primer

i



si
i



'bi
i



tisi
ti si
tisi



ti
i

si
it
'bi



'bi'bi
'bi 'bi
'bi'bi