Thoughts on the REFLECT approach

Literacy, and community development in ethnic minority language groups

by Dennis Malone

Susan Malone

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Dennis and Susan Malone are literacy specialists with SIL. In the 1980s they assisted the Kaugel people of Papua New Guinea in developing a community-based literacy program and later were “loaned” to the government of Papua New Guinea to help establish a nationwide literacy program for that country. Currently they are coordinating SIL’s literacy efforts in the Asia Area. Both have Ph.D.’s in education from Indiana University, USA.

1. Introduction

Actionaid, an international nongovernmental organization (NGO) based in Great Britain, promotes the Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques (REFLECT) as “a radical approach to literacy and social change.” In late 1998 we attended the “First REFLECT Global Conference” in Orissa State, India. This was preceded by a visit to REFLECT field sites in Bangladesh (October 24–November 8).

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Interest in the REFLECT approach has been kindled among SIL members as a result of the growing number of literacy programs that are components of larger community development projects. *Notes on Literacy* has published two articles on REFLECT, both of which provide critiques of the approach: Seyer (1997) from a theoretical point of view, and Herbert and Holman (1998) from the vantage point of its use in an SIL and Actionaid project in Ghana. Our participation in the REFLECT Global Conference and field site visits were our effort to gain firsthand knowledge of the approach and to assess the ways—if any—it could be used or adapted for SIL-related community development projects. We will try not to duplicate the content of the two articles mentioned above. Rather, we will add to it our own critique, including a recommendation that more experimentation with the REFLECT approach be given serious consideration in SIL-related projects.

An approach to literacy that its promoters characterize as “radical” generally gets short shrift in the more conservative and “apolitical” NGOs like SIL. However, the merits of a new and innovative approach to literacy among the world’s marginalized people deserves an open-minded reception, if for no other reason than that it has been developed for the very communities SIL pledges to serve and support.

The following is a description of the REFLECT approach as presented by Actionaid staff and writers, an assessment of the approach as viewed in field visits in Bangladesh, a discussion of advantages and disadvantages, as viewed from an Asia Area perspective, and, finally, a set of recommendations for further study and use.

### 2. The REFLECT approach

Actionaid pays regular homage to Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator and philosopher whose social and political consciousness-raising approach to literacy among the poor and oppressed populations of Brazil and elsewhere raised him to prominence in the field of literacy in the 1970s. His ideas regarded the use of primer-based literacy as a means of “domesticating” the poor, that is, encouraging them to accept their oppressed status rather than take action to secure what is rightfully theirs. He criticized traditional primer-based literacy methods for their “banking-concept” of the learning process; the teacher makes “deposits” to the students’ “knowledge” accounts which the students receive passively. The Freirean approach focused on “dialogue” between a facilitator and the learners using “generative” words taken from the adult learners’ daily existence. These words usually had socio-political significance and were used to problematize existing power relationships. Freire’s approach was quite successful in Brazil where it originated, so much so that when a right wing coup brought the military to power, Freire became a *persona non grata* and was forced to live the next decade or so in exile.

Since the 1970s, the Freirean approach has been adapted for use in widely differing government and nongovernment literacy efforts, including UNESCO’s APPEAL program. However, the approach as conceived by Freire has failed more often than not because of the high demand it places on minimally trained facilitators to generate consciousness-raising dialogue among adult learners. Freire’s literacy instruction worked well in Portuguese (with its open syllables and phonemic alphabet) but not so well with the more difficult orthographies and syllable patterns of language communities in Africa, Latin America, the Pacific, and Asia, thus, the need for a “regenerated” Freirean literacy.
The REFLECT approach incorporates the techniques of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) in an effort to reduce the pressures on facilitators to generate relevant dialogue with adult learners. PRA techniques include, for example, participatory mapping of the local community in which the learners construct on a cleared, bare piece of ground, a map of the local community using sticks, stones, seeds, leaves, twigs, whatever is locally available, to represent such things as households, water sources, gardens, livestock, roads, and bridges. The process of creating this map includes ongoing discussion of what goes where and serves to stimulate a discussion of local problems (for example, distant water sources, diminishing forests, lack of sanitation, flooding). The learners—formed into “circles” both in the literal sense of sitting in a circle and in the sense of a meeting of peers—construct the map, redoing aspects that are considered inaccurate, until the group is agreed that the map accurately represents their community’s reality.

The facilitator then assists the learners in transferring the map to a large sheet of brown paper (or its equivalent) for a more permanent record of the group discussion and deliberations. Pictures and symbols are used to represent houses, household members, water sources (for example, pumps, wells, springs), fields, gardens, forests, and livestock. This map becomes the basis of further discussions (“action points”) regarding ways in which the problems that have been identified can be resolved.

The learners then identify words they want to learn to read that are associated with the concerns that have been raised in their dialogues with the facilitator and each other. The facilitator writes the word for the learners, breaking it down to its component syllables and helping them to read the word. This part of the REFLECT approach is not structured in any traditional educational sense of the term. The words are chosen, more or less randomly, by the learners based on their own interests and discussion. Each learner is provided with an exercise book and encouraged to reproduce the group graphics in them, along with the “generative” words they have identified and which have been written for them by the facilitator. In our field visits to REFLECT sites in Bangladesh, this instructional process included only syllable and alphabet methods, that is, the words were broken down into syllables and pronounced, or the words were broken down to syllables and the symbol names of the syllable were identified and then pronounced as a word (for example, in English, go: “go….gee oh….go”). The facilitator may then use the word in a sentence and write that down for the learners to copy into their exercise books as motivated. Examination of exercise books in the groups we visited indicated that individual learners were free to draw and write whatever interested them. No set drills or patterns were observed. The few individuals that we were able to query were able to explain their diagrams and read the words and sentences they had copied.

Other PRA techniques used include matrices, calendars, and diagrams that represent “local reality” and facilitate dialogue. A typical MATRIX is the “division of labor” grid which breaks the typical day into several segments, then matches them against male and female chores or labor. Another gender-related matrix chart related to who makes household and family decisions on various issues. Calendars divide different community activities among the 12 months of the year. One type of diagram (called a “chapati diagram” because of the use of circles resembling a South Asian bread) depicts credit sources that are available to group members by placing the sources in close or more distant proximity on the diagram, based on the members’ feeling of the credit source’s accessibility and openness to them and their needs.

All of these are considered “empowering community techniques” to the extent that they enable the circle members to identify problems, discuss possible solutions, and plan appropriate courses of action.

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The use of the PRA techniques seems to have greatly improved facilitator training. In the REFLECT circles we visited in Bangladesh, the group members very readily articulated how the different maps, matrices, diagrams, and calendars facilitated discussions of local issues of concern to the members and encouraged them to plan courses of action.

On the other hand, the actual literacy instruction seems to be a secondary concern in the approach, as is the training of facilitators to integrate more participatory and systematic instructional techniques into the approach. Nevertheless, all the REFLECT circles we visited in Bangladesh had members who had acquired considerable literacy skills in a period of less than a year.

3. Field visits: Bangladesh

Actionaid-Bangladesh organized field visits for thirty-six REFLECT Conference participants from UK, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. The participants were divided into six groups and visited six different sectors of Bangladesh. Our group drove about 300 kilometers northwest of Dhaka to Rangpur, from which we visited nine REFLECT circles and the two cooperating NGOs over a period of three days. These visits inform the following observations about the REFLECT approach and its viability for community development-centered literacy efforts in SIL-related projects.

3.1. The REFLECT circles in Bangladesh

All the REFLECT circles were created within existing development-related programs sponsored by other NGOs. The REFLECT circles were supported and supervised by the sponsoring NGO with assistance in training and evaluation from Actionaid-Bangladesh. Each trainer trained and supervised facilitators for fifteen circles. Each circle was limited to a maximum of twenty-five participants. Of the nine circles visited, eight were for women and had female facilitators while one was for men with a male facilitator. All of the circles chosen for visits were a considerable distance from the NGO centers and were among the better circles as judged by the Actionaid evaluators (that is, all were graded “A” in a range from A to C).

3.2. Training for REFLECT in Bangladesh

Since we were not able to observe any REFLECT training activities, a written account of Actionaid’s approach to training was provided by the REFLECT Coordination Unit (RCU) of Actionaid-Bangladesh.

Training is regarded as the key to the capacity building of the REFLECT personnel. Before starting the REFLECT circles, the trainers and the facilitators were provided with Training of Trainers (ToT) and Training of Facilitators (ToF) for the period of 15 and 10 days, respectively. The ToT is conducted by the RCU with support from other trainers of the partner NGOs. The trainers are instrumental to developing capacity of the facilitators. Apart from this, the trainers are regularly meeting in the trainer’s forums which are organized after every 3–4 months in a rotating fashion for 4 days each.

Facilitators also meet together once in every month for a day….The REFLECT trainers are not only playing the role of trainer but also playing the roles of capacity developer, academic supervisor, program developer, researcher, and advocacy worker. Each trainer is also provided with PRA and GAD training as supplementary to the ToT in REFLECT (Actionaid page 1).

Our field visits confirmed that the facilitators have been trained in the PRA and GAD techniques, as the same PRA maps and charts were reproduced in circles over a wide-spread area, and all of them featured gender-awareness activities. In fact, the systematic reproduction of the same graphics, rendering the same conclusions, and similar action plans suggests a more uniform training than one would expect for a participatory approach that is meant to address the unique situations of diverse populations. We, as outside observers, were simultaneously impressed with the success of PRA techniques as focal points for group discussion and action and perplexed that the nature and outcomes of those discussions and actions were so uniformly predictable.

Trainers face other difficulties trying to implement the REFLECT approach. The RCU materials characterize the Trainer as the facilitator’s “friend, philosopher, and facilitator” (Actionaid page 2). However, in all eight circles we observed that were facilitated by women, the trainer was male and positioned himself beside the facilitator to direct her as she was demonstrating the approach to our observation group.

As mentioned above, one reason the Freirean approach to literacy needed to be “regenerated” was because of the inherent difficulty in training facilitators to be as flexible, informed, nonmanipulative, and able to engage in meaningful dialogue as a fellow learner rather than as an authority/teacher figure. We were unable to observe the degree to which this critical aspect of the REFLECT approach has succeeded, because at each circle the trainer or one of the Actionaid or other national NGO staff traveling with us intervened and took over the role of facilitator, for the most part leaving the local facilitator passively observing on the sidelines. The few uninterrupted occasions of facilitating we did get to observe led us to believe that they are indeed trained in the dialogic model and are, generally speaking, able to stay within it, at least up to the point of direct literacy or numeracy instruction, at which point they tend to revert back to the traditional classroom model of teacher-student.

All in all, we were quite impressed with the facilitators but feel that they had only a superficial understanding of the underlying principles and philosophy of the approach and less understanding of the educational problems involved in literacy acquisition. In each circle, the facilitators generated the same kind of graphics with the same interpretations and the same results. Part of this may be attributed to the fact that the trainers who demonstrate the PRA and GAD techniques for the facilitators have never themselves facilitated a REFLECT circle. Thus, they probably cannot provide the kind of modeling that demonstrates the flexibility and creativity needed for a truly participatory and empowering approach. Even so, the esprit de corps of the circles spoke well for what the facilitators accomplished with a limited amount of training. More experience and an improved apprenticeship-type training program could build an even greater capacity for innovation in the facilitators [see recommendations below].

3.3. The REFLECT circles

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3.3.1 Background study. According to the RCU, each one-year phase of the REFLECT program consists of a nine-month REFLECT course preceded by a preparatory three months in which background study is conducted to determine the status of language, literacy, numeracy, and the socioeconomic makeup of the community. The background study is conducted by the implementing organization (in the case of our field visits this would be the Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Services and the Islamic Relief Worldwide) with assistance from the RCU. During this time the facilitators are selected, the training conducted, and the circle learners chosen. “The main objective of doing such a background survey is to acquaint with the type of dialect, the style of indigenous numeracy, and the nature of different socio-economic and cultural conditions of the area. The findings of the background survey are utilized in the REFLECT course” (Actionaid page 2).

We did not observe the use of the background study as a way of incorporating indigenous numeracy into the REFLECT program or of identifying the “different” socio-economic and cultural conditions. At one circle, the facilitator wrote a series of double-digit addition problems on the chalkboard and had the learners write and answer the problems in their notebooks. The numbers were written in the Bengali script, but it appeared that several of the learners calculated the correct answers as they came over to show us their work. This was a primary school-type exercise, decontextualized and meaningless other than as a repetition drill.

The replication of the same issues charts and diagrams from one REFLECT circle to another also seemed to indicate a set “curriculum” rather than a flexible situation-specific dialogue. Nevertheless, the PRA graphics seemed to be uniformly effective in stimulating discussion among the participants.

With respect to cultural conditions, in several circles the women indicated that one of their “action points” was to send their daughters to school now rather than arrange early marriages for them. However, when asked what grades their daughters are in, they replied, “Grade 5.” Thus, the decision to send the girls to school predated the REFLECT program by at least four years and would not have been the result of participating in the REFLECT circle. At least some of the issues ascribed to the REFLECT background study seem to have been previously identified and addressed by the community, a likely occurrence since the sponsoring NGO had been conducting development-related programs for years prior to the advent of REFLECT.

3.3.2 How the REFLECT approach works. The circle begins with participants “visualizing their crucial problems through constructing graphics … on the ground using locally available materials” (Actionaid page 2). The graphic is then transferred from the ground to a large sheet of paper. The graphic is then used to generate an issue for discussion and action. The graphics include “maps of households, land use, land tenancy, calendars of gender workloads, illnesses or income, matrices to analyze local crops, credit sources, use of participation in local organizations” (page 2), usually a total of fifteen to twenty by the end of the literacy course. Examples of all of these types of graphics were observed in our visits.

“After the discussion a key word (generative word/lead sentence/text) is introduced for literacy acquisition” (page 2). The more graphics that are produced, the broader the range of learner-generated vocabulary available for participants to use for reading and writing. Other sources of literacy materials are also used including real-world materials, songs, drama, poems, and proverbs. “There is an emphasis on

writing and active construction of texts rather than passive reading” (page 2). In practice, some of the writing is “passive” in the sense that participants are encouraged to copy the various graphics into their notebooks. The fact that the participants have actively participated in the creation of the graphic material they copy removes the mindlessness of traditional copying activities. The notebooks we observed included a lot of graphics (including some original ones), in addition to words, phrases, sentences, and numeracy activities. In fact, the advanced literacy skills exhibited by some of the participants after only 2–3 months of REFLECT caused us to question whether all the participants entered the program as preliterals.

By the end of a nine-month course, a REFLECT circle “will have produced more than fifteen to twenty graphics and each participant will have a copy of these in their exercise ‘khata’ (notebook), together with phrases they have written” (page 2). This, also, was observed in notebooks that we looked at in several of the circles. The participants’ notebooks then become more than “copy books” of decontextualized drills and words. They constitute of record of the group’s dialogue and discussion on various issues of local importance in a form that participants can read and share with others when so motivated. “Meanwhile the organization which has promoted the literacy program can also end up with a detailed survey of the conditions, needs, and attitudes of the people of every village (which might take years to produce using other methods). As participants construct their own materials, so they take ownership of the issues [that] come up as well and often take local action, change their behavior or their attitudes” (page 2).

Our observations were too limited to confirm this aspect of the REFLECT approach in any generalized way. However, the little we did see and hear predisposes us to believe that the claimed results have corollaries in reality, at least in Bangladesh.

3.3.3 Supervision, monitoring, and evaluation. Although there is no built-in supervision of REFLECT circles in Bangladesh, the trainer-of-facilitators, working with 15 circles, becomes the de facto supervisor, but ostensibly more “a friend, philosopher, and facilitator” (page 2). In an approach that rests so heavily on “participatory” modes of operation, a “supervisor” is somewhat out of place. However, the relationships demonstrated between the trainer and the facilitator in five of the eight circles we visited, would easily fall under the definition of supervisor, with the trainer offering unsolicited advice and direction to the facilitator and the facilitator deferring to the trainer. This trainer-facilitator relationship, it should be noted, was always male-to-female. Traditional roles may be superseding the roles and gender awareness promoted in the REFLECT approach. This underscores the great difficulty, in a hierarchical male-dominated society, of training trainers and facilitators in egalitarian, participatory community development techniques, especially in the relatively short time provided for initial training 15 and 10 days, respectively, for trainers and facilitators).

Monitoring and evaluation are participative activities. Facilitators help participants fill in a monitoring sheet every three months. The facilitator then uses these forms to complete quarterly summary reports which are sent to the REFLECT trainers/coordinators of the project. The trainer/coordinator then reports on the collected summaries from the fifteen circles (or however many the organization is overseeing) and sends the report on the Actionaid RCU Monitoring and Evaluation Coordinator in Dhaka. Standard forms for each of these reports are used, and we were able to view some of them during our visits. Thus, the progress of circles and individuals is meant to be monitored in an ongoing manner.

3.3.4 Post-Literacy and continuing education. According to its own promotional literature, “post-literacy” and “continuing education” constitute processes that “are built-in within the REFLECT approach” (Actionaid, page 3). This revised use of terminology is bound to cause confusion in education circles, where the terms refer to activities that, by definition, occur after initial (that is, basic, functional) literacy instruction has been completed.

We suspect that this recasting of the terms derives from whole language approaches to literacy acquisition. Like REFLECT, these approaches reject a primer and/or phonics based program of instruction. Instead, from the first day they favor the use of the kind of whole texts and “real-world” materials that traditional programs do not introduce until the end of the “code-breaking” process. The REFLECT approach is based on the assumption that the use of participatory techniques will create within the community of participants and in the individual participant the motivation and ability to continue using the skills they have learned during the limited time of the actual learning cycle. From what we gathered, new projects supported by REFLECT Bangladesh go in one-year phases: three months for preliminary field research followed by nine months of meeting together to learn. The number of phases (moving from beginning to more advanced learning) that constitute a complete REFLECT program was not stated in the literature we were given. Apparently, the “normal” REFLECT program is one or two years after which participants enter into one of the larger NGO networks of community action groups, using their newly honed literacy skills to continue addressing community issues, devising group action plans, and evaluating the results of their actions. Thus, the “built-in post-literacy” cannot be legitimately presupposed until some kind of follow-up study of REFLECT “graduates” can be conducted to assess the degree to which their uses of literacy have continued.

With that proviso, the following are what REFLECT organizers in Bangladesh consider the “built-in post-literacy and continuing education” elements of the approach.

1. Actionaid provides training for partner organizations (that is, other NGOs) to
   - ensure the continued production of participant-generated materials
   - arrange exposure visits to other organizations
   - display newspaper items in local areas
   - publish neoliterate magazines
   - collect real-world materials from the community
   - collect post-literacy materials from other organizations, and
   - produce such things as story books, wordbooks, and picture cards.

The partner NGO in the area we visited—the Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Services (RDRS)—publishes a monthly literacy “magazine” with articles of interest for local readers, along with informational and awareness posters and comic-type awareness books. That was the only literature of the type mentioned above that we observed during our visit.

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3. Using the above activities and materials, the partner organizations impart training in such areas as democracy awareness, peace and human rights education, environment management, and women empowerment education. We were not able to observe any of the activities mentioned above.

4. Partner organizations also incorporate REFLECT graduates into the literate environments of Path Anushilon Chaktra (reading circle), and Lokokendra (people’s center). The former is “a kind of reading center that helps develop readership on the one hand and provide[s] literacy materials using local resources on the other” (Actionaid page 3). The latter is “the institutional base for post-REFLECT and continuing education towards sustainable development” (page 3). These are, of course, problematic with respect to the notion of “built-in post-literacy.” If the partner organizations, for whatever reasons, do not include REFLECT graduates in their programs or if the programs cease for some reason, the “built-in” post-literacy ceases. In effect, the REFLECT approach has the same problem as more traditional programs: how do you insure sustained literacy by participants once the program is finished?

5. A “linkage program” establishes a relationship between REFLECT graduates and other “mainstream development projects for achieving livelihood for a better future” (page 3). The intent seems to be that the REFLECT approach not become a dead-end program. An effort is made to link participants with existing, ongoing programs of community development and lifelong education with an emphasis on “sustainability and livelihood, the former referring to a balance among economic efficiency, ecological integrity, and human well-being” (page 3), and the latter referring to “activities and entitlements by which people make a living” (page 3). Rather than a vaguely defined and arbitrary level of literacy, the REFLECT approach aims at “capacity building” in the individual and group. As a result, the technical and sociolinguistic aspects of literacy acquisition may be considered less important.

4. Advantages and disadvantages

Both Seyer (1997) and Holman (Herbert and Holman 1998) present the reader with sets of strengths and weaknesses of the REFLECT method. We will repeat them here in a consolidated form, with our own comments that are a result of our Bangladesh field visits and interactions with Actionaid staff and conference participants at the REFLECT conference in India.

4.1. Advantages

- The motivation of the group of learners is strong and continuous throughout the program (Seyer 1997:37). Seyer attributes this motivation to the use of themes generated by the participants themselves, and Holman agrees that the REFLECT program she observed in Ghana “focuses on topics which are of particular relevance and interest to the learners” (Herbert and Holman 1998:51). Our brief visits to nine circles in Bangladesh confirmed for us the usefulness and genuine interest generated by the use of PRA-type graphics and their ability to uncover issues that are relevant and meaningful to participants. The facilitators, trainers, and NGO organizers all concurred that attendance at the REFLECT circles is very high. We asked the facilitator of the circle that
demonstrated the highest literacy levels in its three-month running period how often the group met. Her response was, “Two hours a day, six days a week.”

- **Community ownership and involvement is inherent in the program.** We agree with Seyer that since the PRA techniques engage the participants actively in articulating their own local reality, “it is not necessary to ‘sell’ the materials or classes to the community; the community owns this process from the beginning” (page 37). In all nine of the circles we visited in Bangladesh the same topics were used and the same format was noted in the maps, charts, and matrices—the implication being that the facilitators were leading circle participants into discussions of topics the facilitators had learned in their own training. Even so, the sense of group participation and ownership of the discussions did not appear to be diminished. Participants readily explained to us each of the maps, matrices, charts, or calendars, not only describing the contents, but also explaining the purpose and use of the graphic in question.

- **The REFLECT approach builds on local knowledge.** We also agree with Seyer and Holman in affirming the success of the REFLECT approach in this vital area. If local knowledge is not valued—and using an instructional method that is at odds, if not contrary, to traditional learning styles does not value local knowledge—then the new knowledge that is imparted in the literacy materials has little chance of incorporation into the thoughts and values of the learners. However, it should be noted that the types of PRA techniques used in the circles we visited lent themselves more to identification of needs and problems than to a more holistic focus on the knowledge and history of the community—whether written or oral—which also includes triumphs and successes, solutions and reconciliations, and a host of other positive experiences through which the community has gained knowledge. To focus only on problems and victimization is to distort, not shape, the local reality. And to work primarily toward social change predisposes the community workers to ignore the aspects of local social and cultural order that the community may want to promote and maintain.

- **It links literacy directly with learner perceived needs and development.** Because the REFLECT approach is not based on pre-determined, ready-made materials, the actual concerns and issues closest to the participants have the opportunity to be voiced and articulated. Primer-based materials bear a heavy burden of generating interest in learners on the basis of keywords and related stories that rarely coincide with the learners’ interests and concerns at the time of the lesson. The REFLECT approach has the capacity to focus on the immediate concerns and interests of the participants and translate them into graphics and writing.

- **Numeracy is fully integrated into the REFLECT approach rather than tacked on as an afterthought as it is in so many other literacy programs.** The integrated numeracy that is described in REFLECT materials was not demonstrated during our visits in Bangladesh. The numeracy we observed was more of the classroom type where the facilitator wrote several double-digit addition problems on the chalkboard and had participants come to the board and try to complete them. We were told anecdotes of participants who were able to help out storekeepers with their accounts after attending the REFLECT circles. The graphics—especially the community maps—have a rich potential for the counting and calculating needed in everyday life. Facilitators, however, may need additional training in order to be alert to the opportunities and to be able to improvise meaningful numeracy activities for the participants.

• **The approach fosters creativity and indigenously-authored literature from the inception of the literacy process.** We agree with both Seyer and Holman that the REFLECT approach should encourage the creation of texts (both graphic and written), if not literature, from the first day onward. In fact, the approach has the potential of fostering a self-concept among participants of being creators of texts, of being writers [see Recommendation 3 below].

• **The REFLECT approach can be adapted to a wide variety of contexts.** Although the nine circles we visited in Bangladesh appeared to share many common traits, even then the adaptability of the approach was evident. The approach was used by both men’s and women’s groups, were facilitated by young women and a young man, as well as older women, were attended by a wide age-range of participants, indoors as well as outdoors. Pilot projects in El Salvador, Uganda, and Bangladesh, reported in Archer and Cottingham (1996a), provided varied contexts for the approach and results reported from those efforts are quite positive. As for adaptability, we did not witness anything in the nine circles we visited that would cause us to question it.

• **In many contexts, the REFLECT approach has been relatively low cost as compared with other approaches.** Seyer qualifies this statement by applying it to the development of “initial” literacy materials. The use of locally available, familiar materials to create graphics that in turn generate texts for initial literacy acquisition is certainly an inexpensive approach. The observable costs in the REFLECT circles we visited in Bangladesh were for the large sheets of brown paper for the maps, charts, and diagrams, the felt-tipped markers, exercise books for the participants, pencils, and pens. There remains, however, an important unanswered question. Can these inexpensive, participant-generated materials help the participants expand and sustain their newly acquired literacy skills and abilities? If not, what additional materials—books, pamphlets, newspapers, posters, comic books, etc.—will be needed and how much will they cost?

• **The approach has the potential to lead to positive community-initiated change (Herbert and Holman 1998:52).** Although Holman does not elaborate on this point, we feel it is one of the strongest points justifying efforts to use and adapt the REFLECT approach in other contexts. Our visits in Bangladesh were much too short to assess whether “positive community-initiated change” had occurred, but we did observe many instances of positive community interactions. For example, as each of the eight women’s circles demonstrated their materials and modus operandi for us, they sat in their typical circle discussing important community issues, problems, and solutions. Invariably, a crowd would gather around the twenty-five participants, made up of children of all ages, men and women, married and unmarried. It seems inevitable that the young girls, listening and watching their mothers and aunts construct graphics and charts and discuss possible actions for improving the community, would be expanding their own sense of purpose and potential. Likewise, in the one men’s circle we visited, the facilitator indicated that a teen-aged participant, sitting beside his father, had quit the formal education class he was enrolled in to join the REFLECT circle “because the activities were more relevant and interesting than the school’s.”

### 4.2. Disadvantages

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• **The acquisition of literacy skills is not sequential** (Seyer 1997:38). Seyer considers it to be a disadvantage that REFLECT literacy instruction lacks a smooth movement “from beginning literacy with a few vocabulary items to larger chunks of language.” This criticism presupposes an understanding of literacy as a linear, sequential process, the same understanding that undergirds primer-based literacy methods. Thus, it would be unfair to accuse the promoters of REFLECT of excluding what they have announced from the beginning that they are rejecting, namely a primer-based approach. On the other hand, the REFLECT facilitators we observed in Bangladesh were doing something very like an alphabet or syllable approach to direct instruction. In several demonstrations, the facilitator wrote the word generated from the discussion on the chalkboard, then broke it down into its component parts, giving the name (not the sound) for each symbol. This was typical. In short, the REFLECT facilitators used the same part-to-whole method that primer approaches use, without the advantage of their carefully constructed progression from most productive to least productive sounds/symbols.

We feel that the theoretically haphazard way that REFLECT developers have incorporated literacy acquisition into the approach is a definite shortcoming, but we do not feel that the addition of a traditional primer is the antidote. In a participatory community development approach such as REFLECT, the logical choice of instructional methodology is one in which the learners participate fully, from the beginning, in meaningful interaction with culturally relevant texts. In the SIL context, three variations on this kind of approach are

1. language experience (more a technique than a method)

2. interactive whole language (a variation/combination of whole-to-part and part-to-whole approaches with the former dominating), and

3. the Multi-Strategy Method (Stringer and Farclas 1987) (a combination of whole-to-part and part-to-whole divided equally into two halves).

• [We present suggestions for a possible adaptation of these models for REFLECT under Recommendation 1 below.]

• **Lack of post-literacy materials leading learners into a wider literate environment.** This is, quite frankly, a deficiency hardly unique to the REFLECT approach. In our opinion, the single most important factor in sustaining literacy is the availability of a large quantity of varied (in topic and level of difficulty), culturally relevant, and affordable literature in the readers’ mother tongue. As Seyer points out, the same needs apply to the language-of-wider-communication that is the target of literacy programs with a transitional component.

• **Need for highly motivated, skilled facilitators.** Seyer and Holman both refer to this as a weakness in the REFLECT approaches they have studied. We agree and consider this a critical issue for REFLECT organizers. Freire’s original literacy approach demanded just such a “highly motivated, highly skilled facilitator” and in many situations the approach failed precisely because those kind of facilitators are hard to find and hard to train. Actionaïd promotes the REFLECT approach (that is, Freire regenerated) as having overcome that major hurdle through the use of “empowering community techniques” (that is, PRA techniques, especially the use of graphics in initial literacy acquisition). Has REFLECT actually solved the Freirean facilitator dilemma or is it a methodological (1999). *Notes on Literacy*, 25(3–4).
Yes, the PRA techniques used by REFLECT facilitators with a minimum of training effectively engage participants in discussion and dialogue of relevant and socially significant issues. We observed some of this ourselves and the reports of other participants’ visits to REFLECT circles in India, Nepal, and other parts of Bangladesh all confirm that this aspect of the approach is highly successful.

No, REFLECT has not solved the training dilemma completely because their facilitators seem to be poorly equipped to implement an unstructured instructional method without a clear understanding of the theory and process of literacy acquisition, especially among adult learners. SIL experience in participatory literacy approaches, however, supports the idea that trainers and facilitators, without high levels of education (that is, not beyond Grade 10 or Form 4) can be equipped to use these techniques effectively.

The training program that is needed would retain the emphases on participation that is already a part of the REFLECT approach as well as the clearly successful use of PRA techniques. It would add a third emphasis, that is, facilitators would gain a basic understanding of the principles and processes of learning that would guide them in fostering literacy acquisition.

- The implications of using the approach with unwritten languages have not been well considered. Seyer makes a strong point that REFLECT promoters have apparently not dealt seriously with the linguistic complexities of many indigenous languages. This, we suspect, is true. In Bangladesh, we asked the RCU staff what they do in areas where the people do not speak Bengali. Their response was that everyone speaks Bengali (and it was true in the circles we visited). However, two of the groups that visited REFLECT circles in the south and east of Bangladesh reported that the people used their own mother tongue in normal community interactions and did not understand Bengali well. These groups recommended that Actionaid investigate using the mother tongue for the PRA graphics. Actionaid staff we spoke with informally in India also indicated their concern with this issue, although as Seyer suggests (1997:39), they do suspect that SIL members purposely keep linguistics as mystifying as possible for the “uninitiated.” That is unfortunate, especially if the emphasis on linguistic concerns—orthography issues such as symbol choice, suprasegmental representations, phonemic versus morphophonemic spellings, for example—hinders the local community’s participation in the whole process of developing a writing system that, in the long run, will be theirs to use and develop. SIL linguists can support the process of developing “user friendly” orthographies by providing linguistically and sociolinguistically viable options for REFLECT and similar projects. Such a role requires the “expert” to relinquish “control” over the decision-making process but in the end fosters community ownership of the orthography.

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations are presented with the hope that SIL teams in a variety of sociolinguistic and cultural settings will experiment with and adapt the REFLECT approach, especially if they are involved in community development projects.

1. That SIL members with training, experience, and expertise (whatever that means!) in literacy acquisition work on adapting interactive whole language, Multi-Strategy Method, or language (1999). Notes on Literacy, 25(3–4).
experience methods into the REFLECT approach. Several features will need to be included:

- A process for developing participant-generated texts beyond the graphics stage
- A process of developing mother tongue writers to produce interesting and culturally relevant literature in the language
- A process by which awareness and other community development materials can be made available to support the literacy acquisition process
- A process by which locally-authored materials can be published, printed, and distributed within the language community at a reasonable cost

2. That the training component for the REFLECT approach be adapted so that, to the extent possible given local constraints, it includes a longer training component for both the trainers and the facilitators. Again, several factors need to be included.

- The training needs to equip facilitators with a basic understanding of the theories and principles that underlie the method that is chosen.
- It needs to provide facilitators with guidelines for introducing the necessary elements of the orthography in a (relatively) structured way, that is, more than a random selection of letters or symbols and less than the strictly controlled introduction of phonemes through primer-based instruction.

3. That research be conducted to determine the degree to which the emphasis on the creation of graphics and text early in the literacy acquisition process correlates with participants’ increased ability to read with understanding and fluency.

4. That SIL members continue to dialogue with Actionaid personnel in the use and adaptation of the REFLECT approach.

6. Conclusion

Our personal view of the REFLECT approach—warts and all, as they say—has resulted in our increased interest in this innovation and optimism about its potential for use in ethnolinguistic minority communities served by SIL personnel and others. Major problems such as facilitator training, literature production, and literacy instructional methodology all need to be addressed. Although not a panacea for every community development or literacy project, the REFLECT approach nevertheless warrants trial and adaptation wherever community participation is integral to the success of the development effort, which is, of course, everywhere.

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Citations


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