Dictionary Turns the Tide

Abstract

You are going to enjoy this. Who would have thought that a dictionary could have such an impact on use of Mother Tongue Scriptures? This came from the Americas Group via Eric Kindberg. This should encourage us to keep at it when some of those tasks in which we are involved seem tedious and we don't see a whole lot of payoff from them.—Doris Porter

Jaap & Morina Feenstra of the NAB translate for the nearly 3,000 Dogrib people scattered over 15,000 square miles in the Northwest Territories. The Dogrib, also known as the Dene people, relate to five population centers and also to Yellowknife which is the capital of the Northwest Territories. These centers are places where they attend school and church, purchase supplies, and make travel connections to the outside world. From 1985 to 1989 the Feenstras lived in one isolated community. Later they moved to Rae-Edzo, the main community, where they lived until they relocated to Yellowknife three years ago.

Roman Catholicism has superceded traditional animism. Catholic values are taught even under the formal education curriculum required by the Canadian government. Tribal Elders participate in the formal teaching of the Dogrib school children. As the ‘watchdogs’ of traditional and Roman Catholic values, they seek to preserve oral Bible stories by teaching them in the vernacular in school.

Until the early 1980s, almost all schooling was done in English. The vernacular was valued in the home but indigenous literature and literacy was virtually nonexistent. During the '80s, however, native language use was encouraged in the schools and the SIL predecessors of the Feenstras responded with literacy efforts. However, lack of literature inhibited motivation and widespread acceptance of literacy. Non-SIL linguists had promised to publish a dictionary but had not carried through.
Why a Dictionary?

Through contacts with teachers in Rae-Edzo, the Feenstras realized that the schools were “screaming for a dictionary.”

One of the teachers asked Jaap, “Don't you have a dictionary, wordlist, or any type of printout?” Jaap had a rudimentary wordlist and planned a dictionary some day. But the wordlist was in no shape to publish. Many entries had to be added, decisions made, and all of it needed thorough checking.

At that point Jaap ran into an old acquaintance. The Superintendent of Dogrib schools had been principal of the school in the bush community where the Feenstras had lived. When he heard about the “dictionary,” he offered to pay the Dogrib salaries to prepare the work for publication—and for the printing itself.

ESCALATING MOTIVATION

Jaap discerned the importance of the project: “Expedience was very important. They were insistent—they wanted it now”. Working quickly, he and his Dogrib helpers checked 200 entries a day, and completed the dictionary with 5,000 entries, some with sample sentences and idiomatic uses of the entry. They published 500 copies as a “Preliminary Dictionary.” Jaap says, “We did it to accommodate the schools, but with the understanding that the Board of Education would eventually write a more polished and complete dictionary.”

The results were dramatic. Immediately teachers used the dictionary in the schools and it quickly became obvious that the publication run had been far too small. Soon after the dictionary was circulated, Dogrib writing began to appear on signs and billboards. Kids tacked computer printouts in the vernacular to the walls. Copies of the book soon began to wear out due to heavy use. Jaap comments: “Although they spoke the vernacular, they had no confidence to write it down until they saw it presented formally in print. The dictionary simplified teaching vernacular literacy, both for teacher and students. Based on dictionary samples they could now make an educated guess at how to spell and conjugate words not yet recorded.”

BENEFITS

In addition to setting the mood for literacy, the dictionary project created good will for everything else the Feenstras did. Teachers started asking for Scripture portions to be used in the public school classroom. The Elders, who recognized that TV and other media were eroding Dogrib values, wanted to teach vernacular Bible stories in the school and insisted on having them in print. Concurrently, the Catholic diocese for the Northwest Territories promoted the use of Bible stories in the vernacular.

The Canadian Bible Society (CBS) was also a player. They had passed along a bundle of six Bible story booklets and wanted them translated into the native languages of Canada. The Feenstras translated the booklets, they were published by the CBS, and Dogrib schools bought 1,000 each of the series of six.

Soon after the publication of the six booklets, a missionary friend transformed three of these booklets into interactive talking booklets for the computer. The interactive Bible stories were installed on numerous school computers, and the kids loved them.
LESSONS LEARNED

1. Publish your language data.
2. Establish good relations (partnerships) with people of the indigenous community and with outsiders who share the same goals.
3. Communicate regularly with community leaders and educators.
4. Respond to felt needs in a timely manner recognizing that you don't need to have everything perfect before you can respond.
5. Remember that careful fieldwork builds respect and trust in your product.

CONCLUSIONS

The timely publication of the Dogrib wordlist “dictionary” initiated wide-spread literacy, promoted general good will for the translation project, and opened a “market” for Bible stories and translated Scriptures. It also created an avenue for spin-off projects (like an interactive computer program), brought about acceptance of the SIL team on their own merit, established a “track record” that enabled the project to secure substantial funding (close to $150,000) from within and outside the Dogrib community and, by working in partnership with the Dogrib School Board, gave the Dogrib leadership the sense that the translation and literacy project was their own initiative. Partnerships were formed in the community, in the schools (both educational and traditional leaders), with the Canadian Bible Society, and with a missionary colleague computer expert.