Grass Roots Literacy in North Wahgi

by Heather McLean

From the time we allocated in February 2001, it seemed that teaching literacy by using *tok ples* (mother tongue) worship songs would be the way to proceed. The folk obviously enjoyed singing them as much as we did and so we asked the pastor to write some songs out for us. We then transferred them to plain-coloured plastic shower curtains for durability, writing with a permanent marker pen. (See appendix for more details.)

**Background**

There were many men and women of varying ages who had never been to school and were quite excited at the prospect of being able to read. It was quite obvious that they were uncomfortable when I produced the song charts and several would not even look at them while I was tracking the songs.

Eight weeks into our time in the village someone said, “You have been here for 8 weeks now. Why haven’t you started literacy classes yet?”, meaning with those people who were too ashamed to follow the song charts.

Naturally with very limited knowledge of the language and so on, we felt a bit hampered!

**The nuts and bolts**

I began to prepare some pre-reading materials and activities on used flour bags and coffee plastic (see Appendix A for more details) and my husband started to make small blackboards for the pre-writing practice which would one day follow. We also prepared an alphabet chart on a large new coffee bag.

The pastor with whom we are working is a quite a talented artist. He was very happy to draw some pictures for the key words on the alphabet chart which we scanned into our computer. We printed the pictures onto overhead projection transparencies, cut them out and placed some coloured cardboard or plastic underneath to give the chart some colour. I sewed the pictures on the first charts in matching coloured thread. For subsequent charts, staples have seemed quite adequate! (See appendix for more details.)
I made many different sets of ‘dominoes’ to give practice in discriminating between syllables or words progressing from vastly different to quite similar.

∞ do do su su wi wi ta ta me me .

These early cards were made from coffee plastic, with different shapes cut on the right hand side so that very new learners could easily tell which way to place them. It is good to put some sort of mark on the left hand side of the first card so that everyone knows where to start. A full stop on the right hand side of the last card also gives a good indication of where the chain should end.

Ø ka ka ke ke ku ku ki ki ko ko .

I also used very similar words from our tok ples to encourage careful discrimination right from the start of the program, stressing that even small differences can make a big difference to the meaning of words, e.g. pinj / pinjin / pinjip / pinjill / pisambel / pisamen / pisem / pisim / pisam /

Other domino cards were made so that the learners could match alphabet chart words and pictures. I usually have twelve cards in a set. Here is a sample of the first few cards.

Protection of computer generated materials

As the conditions in the classrooms are very close to nature, I wanted to protect the aids that we were making. After trying to seal each card with clear Contact, I found a better and more economical way. By placing the printed portion face down on a roll of clear, wide sticky tape and then placing the two layers onto a strip of coffee plastic, I was able to make a very attractive, ‘laminated’ product. A final trim, leaving a small colourless border, seals the edges. Ours even survived being totally immersed in a very muddy flood through our house.

Other learning activities and games used

• Songs were always a large part of the classes and we used activities involving matching lines and words as individual activities or in pairs.
• I enlarged the alphabet pictures and made word cards so that the learners could have fun matching the words with the appropriate pictures. At first they would keep a close eye on the chart on the wall but it was great to see the majority gaining confidence and turning their backs on the chart.
‘Fishing’ for words from the alphabet chart was also very popular. Simply by using a piece of bilum string on a small bamboo pole and suspending a magnet which attracts the paper clip on each plastic card, the ladies had great fun reading words which they ‘hook’. This could be a game between two teams to see who can finish first.

The ever popular game of ‘Snap’ can be played using letters, syllables or tok ples words.

I made jigsaws out of old calendar pictures to encourage some problem solving. There was a duplicate of each picture so that they could either work on top of the picture or look at it from time to time to match the pieces.

I made several cards with pictures and the names written underneath. Other cards had the words divided into syllables and the learners had to match them to the word under each picture from all the syllables in the small envelope.

At first we photographed the alphabet chart and printed a copy for each learner to take home and learn the words. Later we made computerised alphabet charts and alphabet books, which were also very popular.

Around this time, the Western Highlands Provincial Government was issuing very attractive calendars with photos from the province. We obtained a copy from a friend and put very simple captions to each picture. Even those older ladies who were having difficulty learning to recognise words in the songs, excelled at this activity.

Whenever I could see that these ladies were still having difficulty with the basics, I would think, “What can I do to try and help them break the barrier?” I made sheets of either words or pictures in boxes and attached small envelopes to the back of them. Inside the envelopes I put the matching words or pictures. These activities were good for extra practice and also for the early comers while waiting for the rest of the class to arrive.
Around this time I also discovered a wonderful tool to help these dear old souls. Unfortunately I cannot remember the source of this idea and so apologise to the person who thought of it first. Each page has this format.

It introduces just two quite different words per page. I chose to start with some from the alphabet chart and used other picturable words later. By the end of the page, everyone can recognise these two words. I made four page booklets, introducing increasingly similar words as the series proceeded. On the fourth page of each booklet, there are no pictures to prompt the learner. However, if necessary they could always turn back to the appropriate page and refresh their memories.
The first three boxes concentrate on the first three pages, respectively, but the last box is a revision of all three pages.

It was exciting to see elderly ladies carrying these little booklets wherever they went and studying them in their spare moments. One child called out to his father, “Dad, Grandma can read,” as she proudly told him what each word was!

- I am not afraid of the word ‘phonics’. The learners and I believe that it is an essential part of the reading process. After doing a frequency count of the sounds in the language, I made phonics sheets on coffee plastic. These were also the basis of our alphabet book. A typical page would look like this:

```
ngumb / Ngumb
ngal / Ngal
ngunj / Ngunj
ngang / Ngang
a ai au b/ mb d/nd eg i j/nj k l l m n ng nn o oi o p r s t u w y
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**Literacy methods tried and rejected**

1. **Big Book Method**

I tried using this but the general consensus was that there were too many unknowns. The learners were not at all comfortable with the method and related exercises, although they thoroughly enjoyed hearing the stories.
2. **Gudschinsky Method**
   
The pure method was not appropriate for our situation but I have incorporated elements of it in the ‘bottom-up’ section of the primers.

**What is working?**

The **Song Method** (method in detail follows later)

A nativity play at our first Christmas in the village, brought forth a new song and the method that really works in our situation.

1. *Got Ngalem Jisas Ye Kerma*
   
   *Got Ngalem Jisas Ye Kerma.*

   *Got Ngalem Jisas,*

   *Got Ngalem Jisas,*

   *Got Ngalem Jisas Ye Kerma.*

   We were really excited! Because of its simplicity it held great possibilities as a valuable literacy tool. There are only five different words in the first verse!

2. *Maria kong gara kangim Ye Kerma*

   *Maria kong gara kangim Ye Kerma.*

   *Kong gara kangim, Kong gara kangim,*

   *Maria kong gara kangim Ye Kerma.*

   The second verse introduced just another four words. Another song led on quite naturally from this with more repetition.

   *Jisas Ye Kerma,*

   *Jisas Ye Kerma,*

   *Jisas, Olom Ye Kerma.*

   *Kupull rur mal Olom kanim,*

   *Alamb poro Olom pa nnim,*

   *Jisas weri Ye Kerma.*

**Elementary Teacher Training**

Early 2003 saw us teaching at the Elementary Teacher Training course at Kudjip. There were five different languages represented at the course: North Wahgi; South Wahgi; Ek Nii; Narak and *Tok Pisin*.

The same principles of teaching could be applied for all the groups and so we had the opportunity to formalize our methods over six weeks with the new trainee teachers, and some who had already been teaching for one or two years.
Staff and trainee teachers alike were very interested in this method of basing literacy on songs. We finished the course with a recording of fourteen *tok ples* songs, which have now been produced on cassette and are a valuable tool in other areas of our program.

**Local teacher training**

In the village, word was getting around about how much fun the elementary teachers were having. “Why can’t you teach us as well so that we can teach people in our own churches?” was the plaintive cry, from folk who had studied for anything from Grade 6 to Grade 10.

Word was sent around to all the churches in the area and after another week, we started training a group of twelve very keen students.

We began each day with a devotion based on the characteristics of a good teacher. These are the five ‘R’s: Responsibility, Reliability, Respect for the Learners, good stewardship of Resources and the fact that they would get their Reward from our Heavenly Father. These were subsequently included in one of the teachers’ manuals.

**Production of manuals for teachers and learners**

It was obviously time to write some teachers’ manuals and books for learners to remind these fledgling teachers of what they would need to do next. We produced a diglot pre-reading and pre-writing teachers’ guide with an accompanying learners’ book so that each new teacher would not have to produce all the flour-bag charts and other materials which we had used to train them.

The culturally appropriate pictures which I used are found on the “Art of Reading” CD available in the Literacy Department at LCORE, Ukarumpa.

**Introduction to pre-reading**

- We begin with learning to read the learners’ names – using a serrated or zigzag right hand edge so that the learners can be sure of which way to hold and read them.
- This is followed by a memory test using a tray with fifteen different articles. I believe this helps train their minds for retaining details of all the new symbols which they are soon to meet.
- I encourage them to ‘read’ other things, e.g. leaves, *bilum* (string bag) patterns and footprints. Most can do this readily and I like to remind them that they already have many recognition skills. They should not feel inferior just because they have not yet mastered the art of reading the symbols which we use to communicate through the written word.
**Aural and Oral discrimination**

I say words such as ‘toll/ koll, an/ enj, and gat/ bar,’ and ask the learners where the words sound different from one another. Even trainee teachers find this quite difficult at first and so it takes the ‘grass root learners’ some time to distinguish the different sounds, even when they repeat them numerous times. Although extremely fluent in their own language, they have not had to think consciously about these differences. When learning the language as children it has been a far more automatic process.

I follow this procedure with words that have differences word medially and word finally, encouraging the learners to think about the part of their mouths where they are forming the words.

I also use groups of three pictures and get them to point out which name starts in a different way.

**Visual discrimination**

- **Find the odd one:** There are several pages in the learners’ books where they have to find the odd one out, using culturally appropriate pictures, single letters - both upper and lower case - and also syllables and short words from our tok ples. Once again graduate it from quite different to quite similar.

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<tr>
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</table>

- **Finding the same one:** The rest of the pre-reader consists of exercises in finding the same picture, letter, syllable or tok ples word as the one in the left hand box.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>P</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>P</th>
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<tr>
<td>un</td>
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To preserve the books, rather than marking them with pencils, we use popcorn kernels, burrs or small stones to mark items which are the same. Then we can use the same books for future learners.

**Pre-Writing**

- We have found that pre-writing is a most necessary step. These folk have probably never used chalk or a pencil before. It is far more likely that the only tools that they have used are rather large cultivating implements which do not require small motor skills.
• We include exercises such as shaking the hands vigorously, and opening and closing the fingers to loosen the wrists and fingers.
• It is also necessary to show the learners how to hold a piece of chalk or a pencil correctly. This is not an automatic skill.
• We practise drawing lines on individual blackboards, following the pre-writing exercises that Mary Stringer and Robin Rempel included in their teachers’ guides for the multi-strategy and multi-strategy economy models.

Production of manuals for teachers and learners for using the Song Method

The next step was to write a teachers’ guide and student books to show the top-down and bottom-up methods we follow.

Top-down

• Sing the whole simple song which is to be taught in tok ples, many times until all are familiar with the words and the tune.
• Break the song individual lines. Give out lines to various learners and check to see that each learner knows which line he/she is holding.
• While everyone sings the song each line holder must hold it up when just that line is being sung. He/she must hold it so that he/she can read it. The teacher should be able to read it through the plastic on which the lines are written.
• Sing the song several times.
• Swap the lines around the class to give the maximum number of people a turn.
• Break each line into individual words. Give out these cards to as many different people as possible.
• Ask individuals to find their word on the song chart.
• Do not expect them to know the word at this stage although some may. Encourage everyone, by example, to clap and affirm successful attempts at matching the words to those on the song chart, in every place that they appear.
• Discuss how many parts there are in individuals’ names and make sure that they know what to listen for when finding syllables.
• Read the song more slowly while clapping out the syllables.
• Clap out the syllables for each word while singing the song. Point out the difference between mono-syllabic words that might have two musical notes and true multi-syllabic words.
• **Break each word into individual letters.** I have made small alphabet cards with the coffee plastic and protected them with sticky tape as described before. I have printed both upper and lower case so that there are enough of each letter to be able to make several words at once. The learner makes a word using individual letter cards. At first, he/she has an individual word card to copy, and places the letters under each letter on the word card. The teacher asks each individual learner what his/her word says and then mixes up the letters. The learner makes the word again under the word on the card, and again says the word to the teacher. The teacher mixes the letters again and removes the word card. The learner makes the word again, this time from memory, and says the word again to the teacher. The teacher mixes the letters again. The learner makes the word a fourth time, still from memory and says the word to the teacher as he/she visits individual class members. The learner copies the word onto the small blackboard and again says what the word is. The teacher gives the learner a new word to learn and write as above.

**Bottom-up**

• Do a **frequency count** of symbols in songs.
• **Introduce sounds** using picturable words as on the phonics page. I have included these in the three primers at the beginning of teaching each sound.
• Teach how to **write the sounds** in lower and upper case, using the appropriate page of the writing book. After forming the letters and words on the blackboard, encourage the learner to trace over the writing in the book and write it again in the space provided.
• Pair the sounds to make picturable words. After introducing both ‘a’ and ‘m’ we can make ‘am’ which means ‘breast’.
• **Dictate** the words and sounds which are already known. I begin this part of each lesson with a short dictation test.
• **Find** these small words and syllables in known songs for context and fluency.

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Angama ambama wa am
Angama ambama wa
Jisas ya nnim pille gom
Jisas nnim jingndang pille gom.
No pi kumbol
Aminn se mei.
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Transfer of reading skills

We have also used songs for transferring reading skills from Tok Pisin to tok ples. A good Scripture portion to check that each person can indeed read Tok Pisin is Luk 8:4-8. It contains every sound in the Tok Pisin orthography.

There are only six slight differences in the tok ples orthography. Most of these occur because we have chosen to write prenasalisation. We have also chosen to distinguish between the two ‘l’ sounds and the two ‘n’ sounds in the language and so have included two pages to give familiarity with reading words containing those slightly different symbols. This is an example of the ‘mb’ cluster.

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<tr>
<th>mb</th>
<th>moramble</th>
<th>mora.mbile</th>
<th>amb</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ambrel</td>
<td>amb.reml</td>
<td>amb.simb</td>
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<td>ambriel</td>
<td>ga.simb</td>
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<td>tonambel</td>
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I have broken each word down into syllables to encourage the learners to do this when confronted by a longer, more difficult word. This song book (transfer primer) also has an alphabet chart at the front to show all the sounds in the Yu We orthography.

In each transfer class, I firstly introduce the six differences using phonics charts and get the learners to read the words of a song which contains all six. We then read through the entire song, giving them the satisfaction of success in making the reading transfer.

These classes usually take place after a church service in each location, when attendance is at its maximum. Of course, many who cannot read in any language want to stay when they hear that we are going to sing tok ples songs. We believe this instills in them a desire to attend literacy classes when we can offer them in their area.

After reading through each song, we listen to it on the cassette which was recorded at the elementary teacher training course. I encourage everyone to join in the second time and then we play another cassette, set at the same place, and sing that song two more times. We continue in this way with many other tok ples songs which are in the book. This also stimulates enthusiasm for buying the cassette and song book, either immediately or at a later date from the Christian book store in the town near us. The store is happy for us to leave copies there. We also advertise the recorded passage of excerpts of the Gospel of Mark, which has been consultant checked, and have some on hand to sell if there is a request to do so.
At the end of the singing we read part of that passage together from a large chart. This passage is also included at the back of the book and so those who purchase it can have further reading practice at their leisure.

Most are thrilled with the ease of transfer of their reading skills and many shed tears of joy. “Please come again,” is the common response.

**What would I do differently if starting another program?**

- I would start with transfer courses in as many locations as possible. They are proceeding really well and are promoting a lot of interest in the translation program.
- I would get the church leaders from these locations to select at least two people to attend the teacher training courses, rather than volunteers. These people must not be involved in any other responsible, church-related work. We have lost too many promising trainees this way. Some have entered Bible School and others have decided that they are just too busy with other responsibilities.
- We have also lost some very promising trainees because of family problems or marriage. Others have succumbed to the temptations of the world. I am not sure how this can be circumvented. Our frequent absences because of serious family illnesses back home have unfortunately interfered with continuity of classes, classes for men, training programs and close supervision of the fledgling teachers in their far flung locations. Again, there is no real solution to this.

**Acknowledgements:**

I have gleaned some ideas from books and articles by the following people, to whom I am greatly indebted: Gay Brown, Sarah Gudschinsky, Robin Rempel, Mary Stringer, Lyndall Webb, and the unknown source, to which I referred earlier.

**Appendix**

**More information on materials used:**

- Approximately nine songs can fit onto one A$2 plain coloured shower curtain. We have seen similar ones in stores in PNG for around K7 or less. Flour or coffee bags are another alternative.
- Coffee bags for making alphabet charts are approximately K1 at various agricultural supply stores. One bag makes two charts.
- Coffee drying plastic is available from various hardware stores in most towns for around K6.50 per metre. The roll is 1.8 metres wide and so it is possible to make many articles from each metre.