The REFLECT approach used in an SIL setting

by Linda Seyer

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1. Introduction

As the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) works all around the world in a wide variety of language contexts, the same questions keep coming up.

• How will the project continue after SIL no longer has a presence?
• Are SIL members really involving the people with whom they are working?
• How can SIL involve local people more from the very start of the project?
• How can SIL teams increase the number of those who enroll in and complete literacy classes?
• How can SIL increase the “ownership” of the local people from the very beginning?

These questions are relevant not only from the perspective of an SIL literacy worker in the field, but they are crucial also to the way that churches, NGOs, funding agencies, and other organizations perceive SIL’s work. Steve Simpson describes the questions that arise in interfacing with these agencies as they relate to SIL’s commitment to fully partner with those its serves. In examining this issue, he states as follows.

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As I scan some project reports, it is hard to see how local people were involved in strategic planning from the beginning. Most of the time, we outsiders enter a community with goals of what we want to do for them. We have fixed notions about how they will be involved…. We need to examine all of SIL’s activities. What changes need to be made in SIL training programs so that facilitators, rather than doers, emerge from them? How can our field activities be restructured so that expatriate and national can train together? Do we have the organizational will to reduce the gap between expatriate and national in order to make that happen” (Simpson 1997:3–4)?

Local ownership and participation should be the heart of any successful literacy program. The program exists for and should be developed by the local people whom the literacy personnel are there to serve. Literacy teams should always be open to examining whether the methods they are using are effective in serving people and know why they are using these methods. Part of this examination involves understanding the approaches to literacy that are available and not simply using that which has always been used, simply because it is easier, or the literacy personnel are afraid of change. SIL personnel should be leaders in this area and act as responsible professionals in the area of mother tongue literacy.

After having participated in the International Literacy Conference 1996 in Philadelphia, Sandrine Piaget raises some very important issues concerning the professionalism of SIL in the field of literacy. She commented in the Cameroonian branch literacy newsletter that SIL should have a more open attitude toward new approaches in literacy, emphasizing the need to be more open to collaborating with other organizations whenever possible (Piaget 1996:5). SIL is in an ideal situation. It is on the forefront of influencing the field of approaches in adult literacy, both in sharing from its own experiences and learning from both the positive and negative experiences of other programs.

The REFLECT approach to literacy was developed as an experimental approach in an effort to answer some of the questions raised at the beginning of this article. REFLECT stands for Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques. It was been developed by a nongovernmental organization in the United Kingdom (ACTIONAID). The REFLECT approach resulted from ACTIONAID’s experiences in development projects in El Salvador, Uganda, and Bangladesh. This new approach is based on the philosophy of Paulo Freire and the utilization of Participatory Rural Appraisal techniques (PRA. It is being talked about all over the world, impacting the countries and contexts in which SIL works. Josef Mueller has stated, “one recent approach has increased the interest of not only of the World Bank but of many development workers, an exceptional event! … The REFLECT approach replaces prefabricated primers by materials elaborated by the learners themselves…. The REFLECT approach does not make other approaches redundant, but it is based on theory and practice and would seem to be most suitable for some of the small and intensive literacy projects in which lies the future of literacy work …” (1996:14).

Although the REFLECT approach does have several areas in which it has not been adequately developed, it also has much to offer which can broaden and expand SIL’s approach to literacy. It is being increasingly used around the world, and SIL is being confronted with it. SIL members involved in literacy need to study and learn about this new approach and be open to improvement and change when profitable. ACTIONAID, the developers of REFLECT, has invited SIL to give feedback on how the approach can be improved and adapted for the contexts in which SIL works. In order to participate in the dialogue on this new approach, we need to understand it. This gives SIL literacy personnel the opportunity to suggest


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ways of improving the approach, while it gives them experience with the foundational ideas which they
can then adapt to meet the needs of the communities with whom they work. The remainder of this article
seeks to first introduce and summarize the approach then present possibilities for how it might be used in
an SIL context.

2. The REFLECT method

2.1. Background and description of the approach

The REFLECT method is based on a combination of the theory of Paulo Freire and the group methods of
Participatory Rural Appraisal. It was first experimented with in 1993, in three pilot projects (Bangladesh,
Uganda, and El Salvador), as part of a two-year ACTIONAID research project.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, developed a radically different approach to
literacy, whereby he linked literacy to social change. Freire “developed the use of what he called
‘generative words’ for literacy learning. These were words which he felt had a particular cultural or social
significance for the group, such as poverty, homelessness, or fear. The words were used as a springboard
for discussion at the beginning of each teaching session, and often in connection with an image depicting
an aspect of the learner’s life” (Fordham, Holland, and Millican 1995:66).

The generative words were broken into syllables by questioning the learners. The syllables are used for
letter recognition and for creating new words. The dialogue focused on the generative words and was
central to the learning process, as Freire’s approach to literacy was not so much a methodology as a
philosophical approach.

Freire stressed that reading is more than understanding written language. It entails gaining an
understanding of the social, economic, and political situation in which the learners find
themselves and the cause behind that situation. By using generative words, he encouraged his
groups to question not only written information, but the potential for change within their lives. By
starting with words that were emotive and meaningful, he aimed to ensure that reading and
writing could be more closely associated with central issues in people’s lives (ibid.).

The methods of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) are seen by the developers of REFLECT as an ideal
framework for the learners to be actively involved in the process of becoming literate. PRA was originally
developed as a series of techniques for gathering information on community resources and needs before
implementing a community development program. The members of the community themselves are active
participants in the designing and planning of the project, drawing upon local technical and social
knowledge. The techniques include the use of

- transect walks
- maps

• calendars
• matrices, and
• diagrams using whatever materials are locally available.

The emphasis is on active community participation in the project design and implementation rather than extracting information for research purposes and then imposing a development project designed by external agencies.

The PRA techniques have been used for many types of research including the diagnosis of health needs, local agriculture, and the empowerment of women. When PRA techniques are applied in a learning situation such as a literacy group, the techniques are often referred to as Participatory Learning and Action (PLA). This article only gives a brief mention to PRA as a basis of the philosophical framework of REFLECT; it is not intended to give a full presentation of the development approach. For those desiring more information on PRA or PLA techniques, several good works on the subject are listed below.

The REFLECT approach fuses many aspects of the theory of Paulo Freire and PRA techniques, as it systematically introduces literacy within a group of adult learners. Within this approach, literacy is not regarded as a skill to be acquired but as a process. The adult learners are viewed as active participants, not passive recipients, in the process of becoming literate. The PRA techniques are the tools by which the process takes places. The emphasis is on using the PRA techniques to enable a group of people to assess their felt needs, not just for extracting information for a program or agenda imposed from outside. Being consistent with its Freirian ideological framework, the REFLECT approach rejects the use of primers, as contributing to the “banking” concept of education and treating adult learners as empty vessels to be filled. The developers of REFLECT hold the viewpoint that many groups that purport to use a Freirian-based approach to literacy, are in reality, still using primers (with more socially-based vocabulary) and are still practicing a “banking” type approach to adult literacy. Thus, they have rejected primers in this approach.

Rather than using the emotive pictures in conscientization that Freire uses to introduce a topic and corresponding vocabulary, REFLECT uses the PRA techniques such as maps, matrices, and village calendars to investigate a theme of interest to the group of adult learners referred to as a literacy circle. A group FACILITATOR (rather than a teacher) trained in the use of PRA techniques, explores the theme of interest by discussion and dialogue. The group initially records its dialogue and ideas on the theme. An example of such a method would be the study of the theme, for example, natural resources, using objects such as rocks or drawing in the sand. Gradually, the facilitator helps them move from the ground and concrete objects to a large paper and pencil and graphic symbols (pictures). Chalkboards are not often used, as they do not provide a permanent record.

As the learners become more accustomed to the use of graphic representation, the facilitator begins using letters and words rather than graphic symbols. From isolated words, the group moves larger chunks of language: phrases, sentences, and texts. Through the entire process, the learning circle is keeping a written record of all their dialogue and discussion, thus providing a permanent record of materials they themselves have created on topics of interest. The PRA techniques are very versatile in introducing...
literacy and numeracy activities to the theme of the group. These techniques include such activities as the making maps of all kinds, calendars, diagrams, charts, and timelines. These items can be on themes of

- agriculture
- health
- natural resource conservation
- market income and expenditure, and
- a host of other topics.

The important elements of the REFLECT approach may be summarized by the following quote from The REFLECT mother manual. To be consistent with the ideological approach a methodology would have to, for example

- emphasise writing rather than passive reading of fixed texts
- emphasise creative and active involvement of participants
- build on existing knowledge of participants, respecting oral traditions and other “literacies”
- focus on learners generated materials (not prepackaged texts)
- ensure that the process is responsive and relevant to the local context, and
- address the “literacy events” in the wider environment rather than regard literacy as just a classroom activity (Archer and Cottingham 1996b:15).

2.2. Training and selection of group facilitators

The facilitator of the learning circle plays a crucial role in determining the success of REFLECT approach in any particular situation. The selection and training of facilitators is very important, since they are the key to the approach working successfully. The REFLECT mother manual is the guide to developing local facilitator’s manuals for each context and language. The facilitator should be local to the community (in order to promote sustainability), of a similar socioeconomic level, and respectful of the participants of the circle. The larger community should have input into the selection of the facilitator, but the final choice lies with the learning circle itself. The facilitator should demonstrate an attitude of commitment and interest in the participants and have a willingness to learn with them (Archer and Cottingham 1996b:66). In the evaluation made of the initial pilot projects, it has been suggested that a facilitator should have completed a minimum of six years of schooling, although this is not considered as important for success as the attitudes of the facilitator.

2.3. The three pilot projects

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The REFLECT approach was initially part of a two-year research project which began in 1993 in three different parts of the world, each with a different social context. In Uganda, the pilot project was in a multilingual area where neither of the two main local languages was previously written. In El Salvador, the pilot project worked with a grass-roots NGO, *Comunidades Unidas de Usulutan*, which is led by former guerrillas converting to peaceful methods after 10 years of fighting. It was supported by the national NGO, *Corporación Inter-gremial de Alfabetización de la Zona Oriente* (CIAZO). In Bangladesh, the pilot project was with a women’s savings and credit group in a conservative Islamic area.

At the end of the two years, the pilot projects were evaluated by both internal and external consultants. In each area of the pilot projects, other comparable groups using more traditional primer-based approaches were used as control groups, so that the effectiveness of the methodology could be evaluated. The general conclusions of the evaluation claim that “the REFLECT approach proved to be both more effective at teaching people to read and write and more effective at linking literacy to wider development. Of those adults who initially enrolled in REFLECT circles, 65 percent in El Salvador, 60 percent in Bangladesh, and 68 percent in Uganda achieved basic literacy over a one-year period. This compared to 43 percent, 26 percent, and 22 percent in the respective control groups” (*Archer and Cottingham 1996a*:i–ii). It is also noted that the dropout rates were much lower than usually encountered in adult literacy programs, due to the high motivation factor.

It is very important to note that these initial results, though encouraging, are from an evaluation made after only one year into the program. It is far too early to tell how the participants fared in a wider literate environment and to what extent they have consolidated their literacy skills. For more information on the evaluation methodology of the three pilot projects, see *Archer and Cottingham 1996a*.

### 2.4. The REFLECTmother manual

*The REFLECTmother manual* is a combination of a simple textbook on REFLECT methodology, a guide to the theories and philosophies behind REFLECT, and a practical sourcebook for facilitators. It provides the core materials for developing a REFLECT program in any context. It is well organized and easy to use. The first two sections give an explanation of the background and philosophy of the REFLECT approach, drawing on Freire, PRA, Chambers, and others. The third and fourth sections provide a detailed introduction into using REFLECT techniques and examines the functioning of a learning circle. The fifth section is a selection of sample units in REFLECT, including suggestions on how they might be used. The final section gives ideas for adapting the approach to different contexts and how to integrate it with other participatory approaches. The manual is well worth having as a resource book in any literacy library. *The REFLECTmother manual* has been translated into Bengali and Portuguese. Translations into French and Spanish will be following shortly with translation into other languages planned.

The training of REFLECT facilitators usually lasts 12 to 14 days and provides practical hands-on experience in using the techniques described in *The REFLECTmother manual*. The topics generally covered in the training include the following:

- Adult education methodologies
- The theory of REFLECT

3. Advantages of the approach

The REFLECT approach to literacy has several strong advantages that address some the key issues in adult literacy today.

1. **The motivation of the group of learners is strong and continuous throughout the program.** Since the REFLECT units are based on themes coming from the participants themselves and are not imposed from outside, the participants begin with a strong interest in the program, and this motivation continues throughout the program. The dropout rate is said to be lower than with other approaches where the materials are not developed by the participants.

2. **Community ownership and involvement is inherent in the program.** The very content of the units is based on addressing the needs of the community, as the participants themselves see it. It is not necessary to “sell” the materials or classes to the community, the community owns this process from the beginning.

3. **The REFLECT approach builds on local knowledge.** By drawing upon local expertise and experience of the participants to work through the matrices and activities, the approach is continually recognizing and affirming the value of the local knowledge.

4. **It links literacy directly with learner perceived needs and development.** The content of the lessons begins first with a discussion on the needs of the participants, and then moves the selected theme and discussion into the literacy process. This is very different than when the materials devised for the literacy lesson are prepared in advance, as the materials may or may not have anything to do with the felt needs of the participants at that time.

5. 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 use of numeracy skills is inherent in nearly every PRA unit, for example, market price calendars and transect walks.

6. The approach fosters creativity- and indigenously-authored literature from the inception of the literacy process. By the generation of all literacy materials, the concept of the learners writing and creating their own materials to read is inherent from the beginning.

7. The REFLECT approach can be adapted to a wide variety of contexts. This was demonstrated by the diversity between the pilot projects.

8. In many contexts, the REFLECT approach has been relatively low cost as compared with other approaches. Because of the generation of materials from the learners themselves and the use of local materials, the costs of the initial literacy materials can be quite low as compared to many other literacy approaches.

4. Weakness of the approach

Some of the weaknesses of the REFLECT approach to literacy are as follows.

1. The acquisition of literacy skills is not sequential. There is a serious lack of literacy activities to make the jump from graphic representation to reading words and sentences. Indeed, the methodology of the literacy activities is vague in how the learners move smoothly from beginning literacy with a few vocabulary items to larger chunks of language. One can make the assumption that the methodology is mysterious at this point, because it has not been well developed.

2. Lack of postliteracy materials into a wider literate environment. The developers of the REFLECT approach have not dealt with this issue much, although they realize that it is a problem that needs addressing. This is especially true in the context of working in newly written languages, rather than languages of wider communication that already have much developed literature. Even with languages of wider communication, such as French and English, the need for developing graded reading materials that are culturally relevant has not been adequately considered in using REFLECT.

3. Need for highly skilled facilitators. Although the facilitators do not need to be highly educated, they need to be thoroughly trained in use of PRA techniques and how to manage learning circles skillfully without dominating them. Unlike highly structured methodologies such as the Gudschinksy approach, which can be passed on and practiced successfully to literacy teachers with a moderate amount of training, this approach requires a highly skilled facilitator for any degree of success. The training carries a heavy load in determining the success of the program.

4. The implications of using the approach with unwritten languages have not been well considered. Although the pilot project in Uganda involved using the previously unwritten language of Bundibugyo, the REFLECT developers do not yet fully understand all that developing a language entails. They have only considered it as a means to carrying out the REFLECT program, but they have not addressed any of the other issues, such as choice of orthography symbols, writing, and the reading and teaching of tone. They seem to regard discussions of these issues as superfluous and only


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used to keep linguistics as mysterious to the uninitiated. No doubt some experience in dealing with the hard linguistic facts would cure some of their naïveté.

5. Using REFLECT in an SIL context

Admittedly, as with any other approach, the REFLECT approach has both positive and negative aspects. So then, why should it be considered any more than any other approach promoted in recent years? There are several answers to this.

1. As an organization, SIL must begin finding answers to the questions raised at the beginning of this article. Not only do these questions arise from SIL’s own field programs, but increasingly, those organizations with which sponsor SIL members and with which they cooperate are asking the same questions. The REFLECT approach was based on trying to find answers to these questions, and to some degree it has succeeded. Investigating and adapting the positive aspects of REFLECT may help literacy personnel find answers in their own literacy contexts. In particular, those aspects of REFLECT that increase community involvement and ownership should be closely examined and then considered for incorporation into any literacy program.

2. There is a large amount of common ground between the tasks that an SIL language project does and those inherent in the REFLECT process. The difference is that while SIL does them as isolated tasks, the REFLECT approach integrates into the process. SIL does the initial linguistic research and orthography development that needs to be done to write literacy materials in any language. The REFLECT approach does some of this but needs more. SIL collects ethnographic information on the cultures where it works using both objective and participatory approaches. In doing the same type of research, the REFLECT approach is completely participatory, with a learning circle from a particular community analyzing and recording its own environment and culture. Much of the information gathered is the same.

3. SIL actively promotes literacy as a value, working with and training local writers to produce material in their mother tongue. However, because SIL introduces it from outside, its programs often struggle with low motivation. The REFLECT approach begins with community involvement, as it introduces literacy into the process. SIL tends to look at each aspect of its programs separately (with some overlap), for example, linguistics, translation, literacy, ethnology, and community development. The REFLECT approach begins with all of its aspects as an integrated whole. SIL programs could benefit in integrating each aspect more than it is currently doing and by working for more community participation.

4. Some of our own literacy methods actually closely parallel certain aspects of REFLECT. Both the Interactive Whole Language Method and the story track of the Multistrategy method actually incorporate many of the same literacy activities with some slight variations. The village calendar in the Interactive Whole Language approach incorporates many of the same type of units found in The REFLECT mother manual. The writing of stories and the creation of books is nearly identical to the Whole Language activities found in the Multistrategy and Big Book methods. The REFLECT method does not have enough of basic skills practice that should accompany these learner-generated

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materials. This is one area in which many SIL literacy programs are more developed more than those using the REFLECT approach.

5. **The most common weaknesses of many SIL literacy programs are some of the strengths of the REFLECT program.** Many of these have already been described. One weakness is not involving local people enough, thereby increasing local ownership early in SIL language projects. Another weakness is low motivation in literacy classes, which leads to high dropout rates. By utilizing REFLECT techniques some of these negative aspects could even be reversed. REFLECT can help SIL.

6. Conversely, the least developed and weaker areas of the REFLECT approach are those areas in which SIL has most expertise. SIL can help REFLECT. These areas, already detailed above, include the following.

- Linguistic concerns: awareness of the issues involved and practical experience in working with previously unwritten languages
- Writer’s workshops: experience in training local writers to write in their mother tongue addressing the problem of creating a literate environment
- Indigenously-authored literature: experience in developing graded (easy) reading materials for the new literate, something not even considered in *The REFLECT mother manual*. The current REFLECT program would probably be equal to only the preprimer and primer stages of more traditional literacy programs. The postliteracy level is not even dealt with.
- Practical literacy experience in a wide variety of contexts: additional suggestions for literacy activities to strengthen the link from concrete and graphic to written symbols and then to larger chunks of language.

6. **Summary**

Over the past six decades, SIL’s desire to serve those with whom it works has not changed. Yet, the contexts in which it does this work have changed greatly. Meanwhile, many of its approaches and ideas have not changed at the same pace. Making a serious attempt to understand, implement, and even improve on the REFLECT approach is well worth the effort. For many in SIL, it would involve a paradigm shift in their thinking. Not using a primer may even be threatening to many in SIL. The REFLECT approach is not appropriate to all situations and will not solve all problems in SIL literacy programs. There are many places where the primer-based approaches that are being used are effective, and this article is not suggesting that this method replace them. REFLECT is context-specific and flexible, so it readily adapts to the wide variety of contexts in which SIL works. Its strengths address many of the questions with which this paper began, the very questions facing those in literacy field situations. Its weaknesses can be compensated for by the very areas in which SIL has the most expertise, such as the linguistic considerations of writing unwritten languages, developing indigenous literature, and encouraging local authors through writer’s workshops. This author would encourage some of the SIL literacy teams to experiment with this new approach where it seems appropriate, contributing to its

development in a positive way by sharing their experiences. Let everyone be open to studying and understanding new approaches, so that all literacy programs can be as effective as possible.

**References**


Citations


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