

Literacy programmes for large language groups

by Margaret V. Hill

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0. Introduction

Very little seems to have been written about the problems encountered by SIL teams working in literacy programmes among groups numbering over 100,000. These problems may seem quite overwhelming when the team concerned has translation as its primary responsibility. In this article, I am attempting to outline some ways of attacking these problems that we have found helpful.

1. Background

Approximately 750,000 people speak Ngbaka, classified as Adamawa Eastern by Greenberg ([1963](#):9). They live in the northwest corner of Zaire in about a 300 square mile area, mainly in villages but in some towns also. The roads in the area are poor but there are 12 airstrips in use and one mission plane. Two missions work with the Ngbaka: the Evangelical Covenant Church to the east and the Evangelical Free Church to the west, with a total of about 800 churches.

The trade language is Lingala and, up to 1978, all literacy work was conducted in this language. The early 1960s saw the height of adult literacy in the churches. Since then, classes have been held in some churches but less emphasis has been put on literacy. An estimated 10 percent of the people are semiliterate. The motivation for learning to read Ngbaka is high; the main problems of all literacy programmes here are lack of materials and books. There is no government adult education programme.

(1984). *Notes on Literacy*, 43.

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In 1978, at the request of the church leaders, Elaine Thomas and I were seconded as consultants to translation projects in the area. The Ngbaka New Testament was the first project, and was printed in 1983.

The original agreement made with the churches stated that we would help encourage work in literacy. Our time for involvement in literacy has been limited by our priority task of translation. However, we now have an Ngbaka literacy programme underway with over 100 classes in progress. In this particular situation, we have found the following strategies helpful.

2. Specific strategies

2.A. Initial concentration on literates

I believe strongly that a literacy programme is much more likely to succeed if the highest level of educated people are the first to be contacted and involved. Our first courses were held to train translation review committee members, and only French speakers were invited. In this area, very few people speak French, so this ensured that the most educated people were involved from the beginning.

The next stage involved a series of Scripture Use courses for church leaders who were then responsible to teach the rest of the literates in their churches to read Ngbaka. This is not difficult, as Ngbaka has only four more phonemes than the trade language Lingala, plus some nasalized vowels and tone markings. These courses were an intrinsic part of the translation programme, so two aims were accomplished at each course. In addition, the transitional Reading and Writing book from Lingala to Ngbaka has been on sale at various places. Large numbers of copies have been bought by individuals and some people have sent in the test for marking.

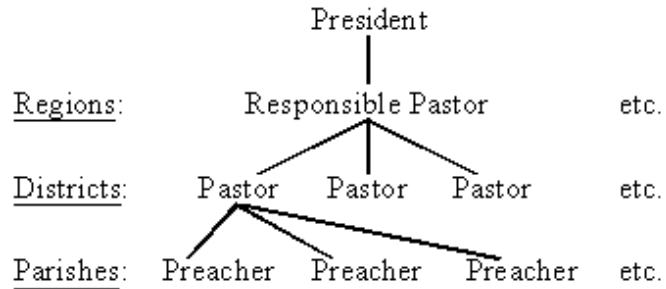
A course was also held for headmasters of primary and secondary schools as part of a regular education course. As a result, the Reading and Writing book is now taught in the 5th year primary, and 1st year secondary in some schools.

Because of these various courses, when we were ready for the first trial reading classes, all the leaders were enthusiastic about reading Ngbaka, and there were plenty of potential teachers available.

2.B. Using existing structures

2.B.1. The churches

In order to make any real impact at all in such a large area, we felt we must work through an existing structure. The obvious one available to us was the churches. Nearly every village has a church. The vast majority of the population are at least nominal Christians so would have no problems about attending class held at the church, even if they were not regular churchgoers. The church structure is as follows:



In each region where we wanted to start literacy classes, we first consulted with the responsible pastor, in order to arrange dates and a place for a course to be held. This is always a Scripture Use course with a literacy component added. When the invitation sheets are sent out, each church is invited to send the preacher, plus two other men whom they choose to be literacy teachers. At the actual course, the responsible pastor and the pastors in charge of districts help us choose 10 parishes in which to start classes. Usually many more than 10 want classes, but we feel at present that 10 new classes per course is enough.

At the course, the literacy teachers are trained, the preachers, pastors and responsible pastor also receive the training. The preacher then knows he is to check on the literacy classes in his district. This has worked out well, as it fits in with the existing structure.

2.B.2. The missions

There are about 30 missionaries working in the Ngbaka area. Since the two missions are very concerned to see more church members literate, both in Ngbaka and Lingala, we work out plans with them before implementation. One or more missionaries join one of us on most of the Ngbaka Literacy and Scripture Use courses. This has the advantage that, following the course, the missionaries can keep and sell the materials needed by the classes in that region. In addition, when they visit the villages for other reasons, they encourage and help the classes.

The most important cooperation so far has been with the Covenant Mission, who sent a short-term worker (for three years) exclusively to work with us on Ngbaka literacy. This has been a great success, and has taken a good part of the literacy programme out of our hands. The Evangelical Free Church is also hoping to send out one or more missionaries to work full- to part-time on Ngbaka literacy.

3. The problems of finance

When working with a large language group, the problem of finances for printing books and buying other materials looms large! This is particularly accentuated here, where the money received from sales to students can in no way pay the printing bills. In addition, travel in the area is very expensive. We have found the following partial solutions to these problems.

3.A. Simplicity

(1984). *Notes on Literacy*, 43.

The basic reading primer consists of 44 lessons only, each lesson taking a single page. This means the book can be produced quite inexpensively. This would **not** work for all languages! Ngbaka is easier to read than many African languages because of the small inventory of phonemes, simple CV patterns, lack of prosodies, such as labialization, and few tones that need marking. This makes it possible to teach the phonemes in 44 lessons.

Teacher aids consist of a chalkboard and 10 flashcards for the first four lessons only. Each teacher makes these aids during the course. This is not ideal, but is workable on a large scale. The prereading pages are printed at the front of the primer. We have not produced a full teacher's guide, but the teacher receives a double sheet explaining the writing to be taught with each lesson. The total materials needed, therefore, are:

For the student

- Primer
- Half an exercise book
- Pencil

For the teacher

- Primer
- Chalkboard and chalk
- 10 flashcards
- Writing instruction sheet
- Registration sheet
- 25 sheets with Lessons 1–4 (see next section)

There are many other things that would help the teacher and student, but a large programme must be limited to essentials that can be provided by the thousands.

3.B. Avoiding wastage

When we started the first trial classes, we found most dropouts occurred during the first few lessons. It was frustrating to see some primers sold but not used very long. Our solution was to prepare a sheet with Lessons 1–4, which have now been printed.

When the teachers complete the training course, they are given 25 sheets of Lessons 1–4. They then enroll 25 students in a class and give each one a sheet. Once the students can read these lessons, they are allowed to buy the primer and the writing materials. If a student gives up after one or two lessons, then the teacher keeps the sheet and lets someone else enter the class. In this way, usually a class of about 20 is ready to buy the primer. This strategy must have saved us hundreds of wasted books. It also gives a real

(1984). *Notes on Literacy*, 43.

incentive for the student to learn the first 4 lessons. In most cases, more students want to join the class than is possible.

The teachers are also taught to give a pre-test at the very beginning of a class, to see if prospective students are able to distinguish between same and different shapes. If a student cannot see that a square and a circle are different, they are not enrolled in the class. This eliminates about 20 percent of the applicants.

3.C. Division and versatility

We have a three-stage programme, as this seems more manageable in terms of book distribution and teacher training.

Stage 1—Learning to read and write Ngbaka, using the primer and health book (6 months).

Stage 2—Further practice in fluent reading and writing Ngbaka, and beginning reading in Lingala (if the student already speaks Lingala) (4 months).

Stage 3—Ngbaka Bible study using the New Testament, and a general knowledge book (3 months).

Other reasons for dividing the programme into stages are:

1. Student incentive to receive a certificate and prize in a special ceremony at the end of each stage
2. Publishing the various books separately, so that nearly all of them can be sold to the general public as well
3. Semiliterates join the class at Stage 2; literates can join the class at Stage 3.

An example of the versatility of books is the health book. It consists of stories about a good and bad family and teaches various health facts within the story. The stories are graded according to the order of introduction of new letters in the primer, so the first story can be read after Lesson 24 of the primer, the second after Lesson 27, and so forth. For a student in Stage 1, it gives a real boost of confidence at Lesson 24, to find he can start to read another book as well. It also gives extra reading practice and, in addition, teaches them useful facts for their everyday life. Anyone else who is literate can buy this book. This book has proven to be so popular that, eventually, we expect to sell at least 15,000 copies of it.

A list of books needed for the stages, divided according to whether they can be sold to the general public, is as follows:

Literacy class only		General public	
Stage 1	Primer	Health	book

Stage 2	Stage	Folk story
	2 book for teachers only	book
		booklets
		Scripture
		Lingala
		new readers
		Agriculture book
Stage 3	—	Bible
		study book
		Ngbaka
		New Testament
		General
		knowledge book

Obviously, the wider the audience, the more copies can be printed, and the price per copy becomes less. We have some other books available, but will concentrate on printing those that have the widest potential audience. We have no trouble at all selling books. The main problem is keeping up with the demand.

3.D. Teacher training

(1984). *Notes on Literacy*, 43.

In our situation, the training of teachers for literacy classes has to be simple. Also, the Ngbaka area is so large and travel is so expensive, that we have always tried to combine literacy teacher training with Scripture Use courses. This works well, since the main thrust in the first three days is Scripture usage. This involves a lot of reading and writing Ngbaka, so the teachers are prepared adequately in fluency. On the fourth day, only literacy subjects are taught. Particular emphasis is given to practice teaching the lessons (including writing and use of flashcards) in small groups. We also teach how to organize the class, introduce, and use the health books, and chalkboard writing. The teachers have plenty of practice in preparing questions for the stories.

In teacher training, we try to emphasize two rules: 1) Tell the class a word only once before asking students to recall it, and 2) never read a story to the class until the students have read it first to you. If the teachers grasp these two principles, they may teach in various other ways that we do not expect, but the classes do learn to read!

We insist that no class can begin until two people have been trained as teachers. Therefore, absences, due to sickness or funerals and so forth, on the part of one of the teachers does not stop the class. Also, the teachers are encouraged to divide the class into fast and slow groups when needed. We emphasize that the local pastor and church leaders need to be careful in their choice of teachers. When there are problems, the local church has the responsibility to solve them. No teacher receives a salary. They do, however, receive a special T-shirt with “Ngbaka” on it when their class receives their certificates. Contrary to experience in some other programmes, we find primary and secondary school teachers make excellent literacy teachers.

We try to run a Scripture Use and Literacy course in each region every six to nine months. Where classes have already started, the teachers are divided into two groups: those beginning Stage 1, and those ready to, or already teaching, Stage 2. Stage 3 is taught as part of the Scripture Use course. All preachers are being encouraged to organize Bible studies in their churches.

3.E. Outside funding

Apart from the initial duplicated trial books, at least 5,000 copies of any book are needed. The money obtained from sales about covers the cost of freighting. This leaves printing bills that no average SIL team could afford to pay themselves. We have found three solutions to this problem:

1. Using books that are already available at subsidized costs
2. Finding organizations who will print books at subsidized costs
3. Getting funds from organizations to pay printing bills and to buy other materials

3.E.1. Books already available

The main source we use is the United Bible Society (UBS). We use their New Readers series of Scripture readings in Lingala, and soon they will print the same series in Ngbaka. These books are sold at a price the local people can afford. The Ngbaka New Testament is also printed and subsidized by the UBS. We

(1984). *Notes on Literacy*, 43.

hope to have other Scriptures published by them, such as Old Testament Bible stories, which would be suitable for Stage 2.

3.E.2. Organizations that will print books

The main organization we have used up to this point is the Scripture Gift Mission (SGM). They print Scripture selection booklets in an attractive format. We set the price and send them the proceeds. Two SGM booklets are an essential part of Stage 2. We expect to continue to have SGM print various booklets at a rate of one a year.

3.E.3. Outright grants of money to the project

The development department of a relief organization has paid for the printing of the health book (and we hope to have the agriculture book paid for by them also). Two relief organizations have given gifts that have been used for printing expenses, chalk, T-shirts, and so forth. Another gift, just received, will pay the salaries of two full-time Zairian literacy organizers and provide them with motorbikes. This will improve considerably the supervision of the classes. The local missions here each paid for the printing of one essential book.

At this point, because of economic problems, there is no way a programme like this can be self-supporting. Anyone concerned with a similar programme, needs to look around for a variety of outside funding.

4. Other problems

It is very easy to lose track of what is going on! It is impossible to really know how each class is functioning, mainly due to the distances involved. As a result, it is important to decentralize administration and be sure someone is supervising each group of classes. It is also important for everyone to have a place where they can buy books which is not too far from their village.

It is hard to keep enough books and materials available. We frequently run short of some item. Few items are available in the country, so we need to plan two years ahead for sea freight, and this is difficult.

While this is not a fully indigenous programme at present, we do not see how to make it so. We ran two successful writers workshops, but then could only produce a fraction of the books written. Our main aim is to raise the literacy rate from 10 percent to 50 percent, so that each church has many literates and could teach the remaining preliterates on a one-to-one basis if desired.

We have many more books we would like to see printed, but lack funds.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, literacy programmes in large language groups have some unique problems, but the results can be very rewarding. From our experience so far, we recommend that teams in a similar situation begin with the literates, use existing structures, and keep everything as simple and basic as possible.

We would very much like to correspond with other teams working in large language groups so we could exchange ideas. Our address is B.P. 1377, Bangui, Central African Republic.

Reference

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Citations