

Learning to read and write without books - is that possible?

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Picture a bush classroom. The teacher is standing at the front of the class. A letter is written on the board, and so is a sentence. A student reads the sentence. Suddenly, a muffled snigger is heard. So are a few scattered snorts of laughter. Finally, the whole room reverberates with the roar of laughter.

What could be so funny? What is the teacher teaching?

A snapshot of the teacher's lesson notes looks like this:

Lesson	Letters/sounds taught	Words/sentences
1	m, a	mama
2	k, m, a,	mama, kam - Mama, kam!
3	i, k, m, a, k	mama, kam, ami, i, kaikai - Mama kam! Ami i kam. Mama kaikai ami.
4	p, i, k, m, a, k	mama, kam, ami, pik, i, kaikai - Mama i kikim pik. Pik i kaikaim mi, mi kaikaim pik.

The sentence that got the children laughing was: 'Mama kam! Ami i kam. Mama kaikai ami.' It's a hilarious sentence for the children, but the more amazing thing is that they have been learning their letters and to read for only 3 weeks. And yet they have been able to read this sentence and understand it!

The teacher is using the Creative Phonics method (created by Dr. Bob Litteral) to teach the children how to read and write. It is a technique that helps a person teach reading and writing when there is little opportunity or money to produce primers or books. It also gives teachers knowledge of what sounds should be taught first for teaching reading, and then helps them make stories using those letters. This technique works well in many languages which have been written phonetically and have limited (if any) books in their language. The Creative Phonics method uses a lot of 'synthetic' phonics (i.e. introduced words and sentences only use sounds that have been taught before). It is basically a 15-30min lesson to help children learn to read in the local language quickly.

In October and December 2010 this Creative Phonics method was taught at workshops in Ukarumpa by Bob Litteral. Bob guided PNG teachers as well as SIL literacy and translation workers to create a structure for ordering lessons to teach reading and writing in PNG languages.

In creating lessons, the first thing to do is to determine the most productive sounds of your language (ie. the sounds which when added to another sound make words quickly). For example in Tok Pisin, for lesson 1: m, a – mama – so by lesson 1 in Tok Pisin the kids can read 'mama'. And for lesson 2: k, m, a – makes kam, ka, mak – so by lesson 2 in Tok Pisin the kids can read a sentence. Mama. Kam!

Once the most productive sounds are found, the teacher decides the order of lessons to teach those productive sounds to enable words and sentences to be made quickly. Then, for each lesson, the teacher makes a list of words that only use the letters that have been taught so far. They also list sentences they can make using those words. These wordlists and sentences are later used in the classroom when a new letter/sound is introduced. They can also be used to make practice reading books and charts. The words and sentences can be hung around the room for revision.



The Creative Phonics method also has a suggested teaching structure:

Monday – Teach new sound & letter

Tuesday – writing and spelling activities

Wednesday – whole word activities

Thursday – sentence activities

Friday – revision/story writing/Language Experience Activities

Over time, the children are introduced to more letters and sounds. They will also come up with their own creative stories. During this process, the teacher creates books and charts using the words and sentences that have been taught, to give the children more reading practice. The teachers can also use Language Experience Activities (LEA) to write stories about activities they have done with the children and to expose them to new

letters. This helps give the children a literate environment with opportunities to practise reading. It also means that the teacher can create literacy materials as they are teaching, rather than waiting until they have a whole literacy curriculum in the local language before they start teaching the children to read and write. Best of all, the next year when the teachers start to teach reading and writing they will already have the basic reading books and can concentrate on making the children's stories into more books and charts for reading practice.

I started this article asking, "Learning to read and write without books - is that possible?". The answer? Yes.....and....No - they also need the reading practice which can be met by books produced during LEA activities.

Catharine Carpenter is based in Ukarumpa and is involved in literacy activities here training Papua New Guineans.



Practice during the workshop.