Literature in use?

Some thoughts on achieving better comprehension and skills

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1. Introduction

One of the most difficult aspects of literacy work, and probably the weakest, is that of ensuring comprehension and fluency skills in newly-literate readers and writers. If, for our purposes, we adhere to a definition of literate that requires a person to be able to abstract meaning from the printed page, and, in turn, be able to communicate understandably in written vernacular, then many literacy graduates fall somewhere short of our definition.

In recent years, the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) has taken giant steps forward in the area of providing the abundant variety of readable, interesting literature which is foundational to achieving a habitual readership. We must continue to pursue that course vigorously. It is my suggestion that we also need to address more seriously the problem of literature in use. We must explore new ways for achieving levels of fluency and comprehension that will equip readers to independently apply and utilize what they read.

Toward this end, several of us in the Philippine Branch have been working with a variety of curriculum activities and programs. These range from the simple incorporation of a few direct content questions within a given book, as used in the Branch Easy Reader Health modules, to extensive Reading Club...
curriculums strategically programmed to move new readers from the primer page into study, application, and self-expression. Some curriculums feature one book in a four-to-five-hour seminar. Some stretch a well-defined course over several months, exposing participants to a wide variety of books along the way. Some use only a book, while others include wall charts, memory cards, song sheets, audio components, reading achievement check lists, and so forth. All require some kind of teacher orientation.

2. Program examples

The following are descriptions, two in some detail, of several curriculum designs now being tested.

2.A. Lubo Kalinga

In 1983, two short writers’ workshops held in Lubo produced 11 vernacular booklets with a variety of content. To date, there has been almost no interest in purchasing copies of vernacular books, yet the books are read avidly when made available. Hopefully, the “blitz” of these first books will promote interest and sales. Recently, the SIL team and local teachers cosponsored a highly successful vernacular reading contest in the primary and secondary schools of Lubo. Many children participated and many others observed the activities. Two Lubo Parent Teacher Association groups function as co-publishers of vernacular materials with SIL.

In order to further promote the use of the new books, we suggested that short (four to five hours) “seminars” be offered on each of several one-topic books. The SIL team chose to begin with a curriculum for a Bible story, aimed at a teenage audience. The report of this project is in the Appendix.

2.B. Umiray Dumaget

During 1984–1986, the SIL worker is concentrating on establishing ongoing literacy among the semi-nomadic Dumaget people. There is a fairly broad range of reading materials and several Dumaget literates have been taught to teach or to tutor others. There is a real hunger to learn, and many new literates return for additional “school.” We suggested that fluency and comprehension skills be worked on while teaching new content. A branch literacy consultant planned tentative curriculums for the Dumaget geography book and “How the Jews lived,” which were then adapted and translated into Dumaget. The material is being taught to advanced reading pupils, modeling their use for Dumaget tutors. So far, feedback has been enthusiastic. The simple, consistent teaching and review steps are easy to follow and to teach. Similar courses are being prepared for other Dumaget books.

2.C. Subanon

A literacy worker with the Translation Association of the Philippines uses a Reading Club approach to effect transfer of reading skills from the second language to the vernacular. Subanon speakers participate in discussions and exercises in which orthographical differences are taught, and spend quantities of time reading aloud in the vernacular. These activities have proven to be beneficial in raising the level of awareness of vernacular books and also in improving language esteem.

2.D. Blaan

In Blaan Reading Clubs, the SIL worker has been experimenting with the use of cassette read-along tapes which pupils listen to while following along in their own language. The purpose of the reading along is to promote increased fluency. Comprehension questions are incorporated in the audio component.

2.E. Tboli

The most extensive Reading Club curriculum that I am aware of is currently used among the Tboli. In 1982, the SIL worker in the language project was approached by some of the lay teachers with an interesting request: Could she suggest something they could do when previous graduates of literacy courses sit in on subsequent beginner classes because they want to continue learning? Local lay pastors also indicated that, while new literates often want to read the New Testament, they struggle because they are not fluent enough to participate easily in group studies.

These problems set us to developing a gradual, progressive fluency and comprehension course. The target group consisted of unskilled readers eager to read the Scriptures. For this reason, we attempted to have a balance between the use of easy Stage 1 reading materials and carefully selected Scriptures, hymns, and Bible stories. Since approximately 35 Tboli books were already in print, we had a wide variety from which to choose. At that time, the newest Tboli publication was an attractive set of five “Easy Reader” booklets translated from United Bible Society materials. These books had not yet been put into distribution, though interest in them was keen, so the new curriculum was initiated with the first books in this series.

The 36-lesson course was designed to be broken into three 12-lesson phases. We suggested one or two two-hour classes per week. In Phase 1, pupils read the first booklet in the “Easy Reader” series, plus two short cultural story books, assorted story handout sheets, and coordinated New Testament selections and hymns. In addition, in order to model reading and promote interest, teachers read aloud at every class session from other selected books, such as a geography book, Old Testament Heroes, and a legend book.

3. Course summary example

The following is a summary of the Phase 1 course and some suggestions for Phase 2. The two courses have both been test-taught and teachers have been trained to instruct subsequent classes. Phase 3 is currently being tested also.

3.1. Tboli reading club

3.1.A. Phase 1: Lessons 1–12

1. Goals
   a. To produce a higher level of fluency and comprehension in individual post-primer literates

Crowell, T. (1986). *Notes on Literacy Special Issue 1 (1986).*
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b. To provide experience in seeking information from the printed page

c. To provide writing, spelling, and punctuation practice

d. To provide opportunities and stimulus for creative writing

e. To nurture and encourage the reading habit

f. To help satisfy an expressed, felt need for learning new information and skills

2. Notes

a. In order to promote the Reading Clubs, a one-page newsprint list (of all Tboli books, prices, and where available) was silk-screened.

b. Each pupil who enrolled in a Phase 1 Reading Club received a card, listing all reading assignments for that phase. As each pupil satisfactorily mastered the book or portion listed, the teacher initialed that line on the card. When the card was completed, a small incentive reward was given, usually a book.

c. The song and verse teaching steps (a. and c. below) were presented in wall chart form for the first three lessons, in order to help pupils with unison reading, following instructions, identifying words, and so forth. After Lesson 3, pupils used their hymnals and handout verse cards for these activities.

3. Teaching steps and time frame

a. Song (15 minutes)

   Purpose—to provide enjoyment, build confidence, promote group unity, and help pupils begin looking for meaning.

   Procedure

   • Class sings song in unison; teacher points to each line.

   • Pupils read song aloud in unison.

   • Volunteers each read one line and point to it.

   • One pupil reads whole song (optional).

   • Class sings song again in unison.

   • Teacher asks comprehension question: What did we sing about? (expect nonspecific answer but one that reflects content)

b. Reading and writing (60 minutes)

   Lessons 1 and 2, primer review; Lessons 3–7 as follows:

   Procedure

Crowell, T. (1986). *Notes on Literacy Special Issue 1 (1986).*

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• Teacher reads designated portion (two pages, more or less) of Easy Reader 1, while pupils listen (text for Lesson 3 is Psalm 1 in the Easy Reader version).

• Class reads same portion in unison with teacher.

• Each pupil reads one or two sentences aloud, volunteers first.

• Group reads in unison; teacher attempts to set a relatively normal pace.

• Comprehension activities
  • Teacher asks two or three content questions (for example, What are the two kinds of people David speaks of here; people who obey God or people who disobey God?)
  • Teacher asks each pupil to put his finger on a specific word or phrase; helps each one to identify and read it
  • Teacher may ask a more abstract question, such as “What was new to you in what we read today? (or interesting, and so forth)

• Writing activities
  • Teacher dictates four to five words taken from current reading; each pupil writes the words; papers are collected or exchanged for some type of correcting procedure
  • Teacher dictates a short sentence about today’s reading for each pupil to write (for example, “Today, I read Psalm 1” or “I want to obey God.”)

• New Testament verse (20 minutes)
  Lesson 1 used Ephesians 4:32. For the first three lessons, verses were printed on large wall charts. The verse used in every lesson of Phase 1 was also handed out on a 3 x 5 card to be taken home.
  Procedure
  • Teacher reads verse aloud at normal speed
  • Class reads verse in unison
  • Volunteers read
  • Comprehension questions
    • Teacher asks, “What is one thing this verse tells us?” (to be kind, forgiving, and so forth)
    • Volunteers point to designated words or phrases in the verse as teacher reads them aloud.
  • Writing
    • Teacher asks pupils to write something that this verse tells them (free writing, not dictation), for example, I am to be kind and forgiving
    • Class reads the verse aloud in unison from handout cards
d. Teacher models reading (15 minutes)
   
   Purpose
   
   • To show pupils how reading in the vernacular sounds
   • To expose pupils to a variety of vernacular books
   • To help pupils discover information in books
   
   Procedure
   
   • Teacher practices reading the selected portion in advance
   • Teacher instructs pupils to listen (no books)
   • Teacher reads aloud at normal pace
   • Teacher asks two or three comprehension questions about what has just been read
   • Discussion of the purpose of this particular type of book, how it can serve the reader, and so forth

f. Individual reading time (10–15 minutes)
   
   Pupils are encouraged to read anything they choose during the remainder of class time. Teacher circulates among pupils in order to help and encourage. Occasionally, specific short story sheets are handed out.

4. Review Lesson 8
   
   Steps 1 and 4 were unchanged.
   
   Step 2—Reading and writing utilized a handout sheet of Hebrews 11:8–12. This text was chosen because the Easy Reader, which was used in Lessons 3–7, included several stories of Abraham. Reading steps were the same, and the writing activity encouraged pupils to write anything they wanted about Abraham. Pupils were asked to read aloud (what they had written) to the class.
   
   Instead of a new verse, pupils were asked to read aloud any verse from Lessons 1–7, or another verse of their choosing.
   
   Step 5—pupils were encouraged to try writing a short story (even one or two sentences) and then share aloud with the class.

5. Lessons 9–11
   
   Same format as Lessons 3–7. New reading book was an 18-page folk tale broken into three reading segments. Pupils read each day’s assignment silently the first time, then in unison, and so forth.
   
   Step 3—New Testament verse utilized a whole chapter, 1 John 1, broken into three segments.
   
   On Day 11, each pupil chose about one page or text he would read the next day in the closing class. Selections were from any class reading, another book, or the pupil’s own composition.

6. Closing—Lesson 12
a. Teacher commended pupils for progress made; read list of materials they had mastered: Easy Reader 1, two story books, story sheets, Hebrews 11:8–12, 1 John 1, seven other verses, and 10 songs
b. Pupils read selections prepared
c. Unison reading of 1 John 1

3.1.B. Phase 2: Lessons 13–24

The Phase 2 lessons continue in much the same format, gradually covering more reading material in each lesson and somewhat more difficult content. Some alterations occur: the teacher spends time discussing, pointing out, and reading “front matter” in books (title, table of contents, and so forth). Pupils begin using notebooks to record their homework and creative writing; a homework assignment and discussion section is added (pupils answer questions orally on homework reading; later they write answers and bring to class to read aloud). Pupils read aloud to others at home as part of each assignment, and page numbers, verse references, and so forth are discussed and practice is given in locating them.

4. Reading club suggestions

A. Before beginning a Reading Club, a considerable amount of reading material should be available for new readers and an adequate number of copies of each publication.
B. In choosing the content to use, “grade” the material, choosing the easiest for Phase 1 and gradually working into more difficult texts.
C. Plan ahead! Decide how much an average member of the class can read in the time allotted. Divide the book accordingly.
D. Questions serve various purposes: they aid comprehension, they teach pupils to search for information in their reading, and they teach content. Keep these purposes in mind when selecting questions.
E. Prepare and test a Teacher’s Guide for the Reading Club and teach the instructors to use it.

Appendix

1. Literacy promotion—thought about a curriculum?

[Topics: curriculum, promotion of literacy]

Patti Dunn, Philippine Branch

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A. Introduction

Literacy and translation personnel face the same potential problem—getting translated material in use. The Philippine Branch has been encouraging the use of curriculums as part of the promotion strategy. The curriculum is a tailor-made plan for presenting/teaching a specific piece of reading material. It includes goals, objectives, and activities presented in a teaching sequence, with a specific target group in mind. Whether used in literacy classes, reading clubs, or informal neighborhood gatherings, having a curriculum gets books off the shelf and into people’s hands.

During two months in 1984, I was assigned to help develop curriculums for some of the books produced in two Lubo Kalinga writers’ workshops and to test at least one curriculum with the intended audience.

B. Background of the Lubo project

Lubo is a village of approximately 1,500 people. Elementary and high school education has been available since World War II. The literacy rate is estimated at about 75 percent, but this reflects literacy ability in a second language rather than the vernacular.

SIL’s involvement with the Lubo Kalinga people began in 1982. Basic literacy is not a major need at this time. However, the production and promotion of a significant body of vernacular reading material was deemed important. From two writers’ workshops held in 1984, the following materials were produced: two personal experience booklets, four collections of folk tales, two health booklets, and three Bible story booklets.

C. Curriculum developed and tested

The first curriculum I prepared, working from a back translation of the vernacular text, was for David and Goliath. This was chosen for the test model.

Considering the target audience and the time frame, a small beginning seemed best. The class consisted of four or five teenage girls, attending the local school, who were already fairly literate but not in the vernacular. The classes met twice a week for two weeks, approximately one hour per class session, and classes were held after school in the free time the girls had before their responsibilities at home.

1. The curriculum goals were as follows:
   a. To promote understanding of the story content
   b. To provide ample practice in reading the vernacular
   c. To motivate reading and using vernacular literature
   d. To understand that God is all powerful

2. Specific objectives for the four sessions were that readers should be able to do the following:
a. Read through the story and complete accompanying activities
b. Demonstrate comprehension by retelling the story
c. Identify/locate key words on request
d. Demonstrate fluency in oral reading

3. A summary of the curriculum content is as follows:

   Day 1
   a. Teacher reads story aloud in English, then vernacular, with pupils following.
   b. Class reads first four paragraphs of story in unison.
   c. Individuals read portions aloud until teacher stops them, at which point all pupils read the next word in the text, and then teacher calls on someone else to continue reading.
   d. Questions: Pupils are asked to find the answer in the text and then read the sentence in which the answer occurs. (Example: Who was the king of the Israelites? Point to where it says his name and read that sentence.)
   e. Students look for the name Goliath in today’s text and count the number of occurrences. When each one finds all occurrences, they take turns reading those sentences aloud.
   f. Activities: Writing activities are handed out on slips of paper. Pupils locate sentences in the text and fill in blanks on their slips. Four incomplete sentences are given. (Example: Goliath was very _______ and _______.)
   g. Teacher reads a sentence from the story text, and then a partial sentence about life in the Lubo cultural community. Pupils are to write freely/creatively, in order to finish the sentence. (Example: There was a town in Israel called Bethlehem where the family of Jesse lived. My family lives in Lubo. In Lubo ______________.)
   h. Class rereads today’s portion of the story aloud.

   Day 2
   a. Review without reference to text:
      • One pupil was asked to tell all that she could remember about Goliath. Others then help fill in details.
      • Discussion of Goliath’s challenge to the Israelites. (Goading or challenging one’s opponents is culturally relevant in Lubo.)
      • Question: What was the name of Jesse’s youngest child?
   b. Class reads second section of the story (four paragraphs).

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c. Individual reads portions of today’s text, as on Day 1, Number 3.

d. Discussion of quotation marks, meaning, and use. Pupils locate quotes in text. Teacher assigns parts to pupils (narrator, Jesse, David, Saul, Eliab) and pupils read through today’s text in parts.

e. Class looks for the word “fight,” as in Day 1, Number 5.

f. Questions: As in Day 1, Number 4. (Example: What was the reward the king promised to the one who killed Goliath? Four direct content questions are used and one optional thought question: What person can fight against the people of God? See Section D note.)

g. Activities: Writing activities were handed out on slips of paper.

- Pupils supply missing vowels in eight vernacular words (see Section D note).
- Pupils choose correct answer from column on right in order to make a “pair”:

  David and _______  five stones
  lion and _______  Goliath
  slingshot and _______  bear

h. Teacher dictates a partial statement and asks pupils to complete it: If I had a slingshot, I would ______________.

i. Class rereads today’s portion of the story aloud.

Day 3

a. Review, as on Day 2. Four content questions. (Example, Jesse sent David out to meet his brothers. What did he take with him?)

b. Class reads remainder of the story together, then individually take turns.

c. Teacher restates part of the story, then asks for volunteers to complete it.

d. Pupils find the word “dog” in text and point to it.

e. Pupils count occurrences of “spear” in today’s text, then take turns reading it in context.

f. Questions: As above.

g. Activities: Hand out writing activities.

- Pupils take phrases from the text and line them up in proper sequence.
- Sentences are given in which incorrect words occur. Pupils circle the incorrect word and write the correct word on the line. (Example: David drew out betel nut chew from his pouch. (stones).
h. Teacher asks pupils to write, completing the following: The part I like best about this story is ____________.

i. Class rereads today’s portion of the story.

Day 4

a. Review; teacher retells entire story.

b. Pupils retell the story highlights as the teacher writes their sentences on paper. A six-line or seven-line story is then transferred to the chalkboard for an “experience chart.” Students read it and then copy the condensed story to take home.

c. A recipe for stick biscuits is written on the chalkboard in the vernacular. Pupils copy it. A discussion on how to use the recipe is followed by the class making biscuits and eating them. Reading the vernacular can be useful and fun!

D. Evaluation

We were generally satisfied with the curriculum and found it met our goals. The pupils enjoyed meeting together, participated enthusiastically, and were ready to enroll in another course. They gained comprehension and fluency skills, were motivated to read and write the vernacular, found that reading can be fun, and learned about the Bible.

1. Some tips

a. Make extra copies of test materials. Unexpected friends tend to show up and want to be included. Sharing materials did not work well.

b. Call upon pupils to read in a random order to maintain better attention; pupils attention tends to drift after their turn.

c. Collect materials after each session; materials carried home seldom reappear.

d. Some kind of activity sheet or “take home” tends to build enthusiasm and gives pupils something to show for their efforts. It also provides reinforcement as they share with others.

2. Changes we would make next time

a. Include more time for corporate and individual reading practice.

b. Omit reading the story first in English. Perhaps a few paragraphs of English would be helpful, but only enough to get the students started reading together, then switch to the vernacular. (The test class was literate in English.)

c. Questions should be asked first, giving everyone a chance to locate the answer before one person is called on to answer.
d. Omit the optional thought questions, that is, those which are not direct content questions. These are too difficult for pupils to handle at this point.

e. Day 2, Number 7: The drill in which pupils were asked to supply missing vowels in vernacular words was too difficult because examples had more than one vowel missing. It would have been preferable to use shorter words with only one letter missing.

3. Success tips

a. Having the class respond after each reader (Day 1, letter c) keeps attention on the text.

b. Retelling the story, role-playing, and sequencing activities were enjoyed and helped pupils to summarize the story on the last day for their experience chart.

c. Discussing the writing activities after they were done, without calling attention to those who made mistakes, was helpful. Correction could be made by individuals without loss of face!

d. The stick biscuit project was a definite success! It broadened reading and writing skills, but even before we did it, it served as a motivational function. It helped tie reading and writing with real life and a particular felt need of the girls.

Using a definitive, well-planned curriculum, aimed at a specific target audience motivates, provides skills practice and demonstrates the value of literature in use. It gives wonderful contact with people—and it is fun!