

VERNACULAR LITERACY: BRIDGE TO A NATIONAL LANGUAGE

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A question being asked today by academics and educationalists throughout the world is; "Is literacy outmoded?" In view of the revolution in communications media, is it necessary to use the traditional methods for the communication of knowledge?

At the Fifth Waigani Seminar, Professor R.C. Theobald very effectively demonstrated the advantages and the potential of modern communications media in an audio-visual presentation and telephone link with the U.S.A.⁽²⁾ His argument was that it is unnecessary to bring a developing nation through all the stages of development experienced by the western world. We are now well into the technological age in which electronics is playing the major role as the media of mass communication. We must not expect developing nations to endure their own industrial revolution. They have the advantage of learning from the mistakes of the past. They can cash in on the advances made by the United States, Britain and European countries and leapfrog into the age of modern technology.

Partially basing his hypothesis upon his own demonstration at the seminar, he further suggested that in the field of education it should be possible to eliminate a basic concept - the necessity to be able to read first in order to obtain an education. He proposed the elimination of the "agonizing process" of literacy as an initial step. He qualified this by stating that literacy was "useful" but that we can use the modern technology that is "within the culture and resources of the country".

Professor Theobald's propositions were enthusiastically acclaimed by other speakers at the seminar. Few would be bold enough to oppose such progressive thinking from one of the world's leading scientists. However, during the session one could not help feeling that he was seeing the problems of this developing country through western eyes without being particularly conversant with the true situation that exists in the villages where ninety per cent of the population lives.

There is no doubt that the new technology could be used to good effect in the urban centres where relatively up-to-date services already exist. However, it is questionable that the new technology would be practical in rural areas where services are virtually non-existent.

In one African country television was used as a medium of instruction for rural schools. The scheme was sponsored by a developed country who forgot to include one essential ingredient in their beneficial aid programme, namely technicians. The result was that at one stage up to ninety per cent of the sets were inoperative and the net result

in educational advancement was somewhat disappointing. This does not present a valid reason why such techniques should not be introduced into this country. However, with so few indigenous technicians available and the high cost of employing expatriate technicians it is highly improbable that this country will be able to afford the luxury of television (on a large scale) for some years to come. This is but one consideration that must not be ignored in proposing the introduction of new technological methods in education.

There is no suggestion that we should not introduce television, audio-visual equipment, cassette recorders and all the glittering gadgets of the electronic age just as soon as is practicable. I would suggest that we give more serious thought to improving the traditional and well-tried methods such as literacy. We should not be blinded to the value of the traditional methods by the dazzle of the new. Let us be sure the new will work (without the need for too many technicians) before we reject the old.

In confining this article to literacy I readily admit that other methods of disseminating knowledge in a given situation are equally or more effective. The dialogue method used amongst the sweet potato growers of the Lova Marketing Co-operative, Goroka was the most effective in that given situation.⁽³⁾ The practical spoon-feeding at the Kamaliki Agricultural Vocational School where students are given all practical training and then set up as smallholders is obviously reaping a fruitful harvest.⁽⁴⁾ The "wajang" drama method of adult education is very effective in Indonesia.⁽⁵⁾ However, literacy has been and will continue to be a useful tool in certain adult education programmes for many years to come.

THE STATUS QUO

In undeveloped and developing areas of the world there is a close relationship between economic development and other social change and the elimination of mass illiteracy. The Territory of Papua New Guinea is no exception. There is, however, little to be gained from discussing at length the state of literacy in this Territory as few accurate statistics are currently available, but we are on fairly safe ground in assuming that over 80% of the adult indigenous population is illiterate. We partially base this on the 1966 Territory census⁽⁶⁾ at which 11.41% were literate in English, 12.23% were literate in Pidgin and 3.38% were literate in Police Motu. To arrive at a total number of literates it is not reasonable to add the three figures. We must assume that many of those literate in English will also be literate in Pidgin or Police Motu.

However, it is valid to question the accuracy of the 1966 "literacy" census, as it did not include more than a superficial comprehension test. Furthermore, it is doubtful that the ability to "read and write simple sentences" in a language can be rated as functional literacy. Literacy that is not functional is of no practical value and an individual without

functional literacy should not qualify as literate. So the estimate of over 80% may be extremely conservative. In some developed countries a literate person is defined as one who is able to read and write as well as a child who has had four full years of schooling. For this reason the traditional literacy tests when taking censuses were dropped and a statement concerning the extent of schooling was adopted. This practice began in the United States as far back as 1940. Research shows that there is a reasonably close correspondence on the average between the extent of schooling and reading ability. If this method was adopted in the next Territory census it may provide a more accurate guide to the extent of illiteracy than the present system.

Mass illiteracy is a fact of life in this country and many claim that it is the most critical problem facing the Territory today. (With only 50% of the Territory's children attending school and an increasing population, the percentage of illiterates will not be substantially reduced in the foreseeable future.) It is not a problem peculiar to the Territory but is worldwide. Nor is there a panacea to overcome the problem here anymore than there is in Africa, Asia or South America. In fact, by nature of the economic and social structure of society, the difficulties are far greater here than in most other countries and the cure will be a longer and more painful process.

VARIOUS APPROACHES

There are various ways in which the problem is being faced in this country. Some see it as so mammoth a task that there is little value in attacking it at all. They claim that there is not the time, money or personnel available. This view is irrational and defeatist.

Others place adult literacy low on their priorities. For example, although the Department of Education is well aware of the acuteness of the illiteracy problem, they feel that they are in no position to become too involved in adult education as their resources are fully committed to education at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Thus, there is an adult education section⁽⁷⁾ within the Department but it has a very small staff and limited financial resources. It is not in a position to make a major contribution in solving the overall problem.

No one would doubt the sincerity of the Department in their efforts to eliminate illiteracy in the Territory. However, the dropout problem stressed in the following quotation from a UNESCO report,⁽⁸⁾ seems to be neglected.

"...The most obvious long-term remedy for mass illiteracy is to cut off illiteracy at its source by ensuring universal and adequate primary education. Yet the expansion of primary schools is not enough in itself,

nor is it always fully effective, for it is well known that children returning from the primary school to largely illiterate adult communities rapidly fall back into illiteracy. . . "

Without complementary adult education programmes the appalling wastage in school drop-outs and the lapsing back into illiteracy will continue. A complementary adult education programme may help to eliminate the present illiteracy amongst early school leavers.

MISSION INVOLVEMENT

Various Christian Mission groups are bearing much of the burden of adult literacy in this country. Despite limited resources in finance and personnel some missions feel that some effort must be made to reduce illiteracy and to provide at least sufficient training for people to read the Scriptures or the liturgy of the Church. A few groups are making a more serious attempt to provide adults with a basic education.

Information of Mission adult literacy work is sketchy. There has been little co-ordination, mainly due to poor communications between the various missions and lack of staff to establish and maintain contact. The picture is now changing with the more ecumenical approach to mission work and the establishing of inter-mission co-ordinating bodies. (9)

An example of this co-ordinated approach is the Pidgin Adult Education Course. (10) This course, which includes basic primers, graded follow-up readers and teachers' guides is the joint effort of several Protestant and Roman Catholic missions and the Summer Institute of Linguistics under the auspices of Literacy Literature New Guinea, which has acted as a co-ordinating body.

Most of the literacy work of missions has in the past been conducted in vernacular languages, area church languages, (11) or Pidgin. Some have been of a more formal type providing basic education for children in schools sponsored by denominational missions. With the transfer of missions to the unified Territory Education System, many missions are now focusing their attention on adult education. Mission publishers are producing an increasing volume of literature for adults, particularly in Pidgin and Simple English.

A number of missions have sponsored adult literacy programmes for many years with varied success. Tragically, many of these efforts have been abortive due often to changing personnel or other circumstances. Programmes have been launched without the realization that sustained effort over a long period and the provision of adequate reading material is essential for producing functional literates. Once an adult has attended classes but had failed to realise his aspiration to become literate he is not likely to have a second attempt or to encourage others.

ADULT EDUCATION IN VERNACULAR LANGUAGES

There are organizations working in the Territory who are engaged in adult education. The Summer Institute of Linguistics is one of these.

The vernacular language is always used as the medium of instruction of teaching the mechanics of reading and writing. It has been adequately demonstrated that the soundest educational basis of instruction in reading is in a person's mother tongue.⁽¹²⁾ This especially applies to adults who have neither the time nor, with very few exceptions, the ability to master the new skill of reading communicated to them in a language in which they do not have conversational fluency.

Working through the vernacular is a slow process initially for the translator and literacy worker. It is, however, the surest and ultimately the most effective method of teaching reading to ensure complete understanding of the contents of reading matter. The use of the vernacular in no way deters the desire to transfer into a national language. On the contrary, experience has shown that the ability to read and write the vernacular increases the desire to read and write in Pidgin or English, and it also greatly speeds and simplifies the acquisition of these skills.

SOME AREAS OF DIFFICULTY

1. In its initial stages an adult education programme relies heavily upon a few individuals. In the case of S. I. L. it usually involves only a team of two Europeans. Thus, in the event of sickness or other commitments the programme can come to a virtual standstill. Most Government-sponsored programmes are also plagued by the problems created by resignations or changing personnel.

2. As soon as practical an instructor training programme is commenced and instructors are sought from amongst the graduates of the first classes or amongst those who are already literate in English or Pidgin. Most instructors demand and need payment for their services. Finding adequate funds and the best channel for payment is sometimes a difficulty. Instructors need unusual dedication to remain at their posts and deny themselves the attractions of urban living.

3. Publishing is expensive and uneconomical for the small editions required for most vernaculars in this country. To encourage new literates to buy literature, it is usually necessary to subsidise selling prices. However, standardization of supplementary literature and better distribution methods is reducing production costs somewhat and at the same time maintaining quality.

4. It is sometimes difficult to motivate people to want to read. It is not always easy to relate reading to the needs of daily living. Motivation must be a continuing process especially in the period immediately following the initial learning stage. The new literate must be convinced that the purchase of literature is a worthwhile investment. Literature is usually rated low as a necessity when competing with trade store goods. Nevertheless if literature is attractive and durable it will probably sell. The average indigene reader will usually be more willing to pay the price for a well-bound plastic-covered book he knows will be durable than a cheap paperback. (13)

MOTIVATING FACTORS

In many areas people do want to learn and continue reading. Their reasons are varied, and should be taken into account when planning a new programme and in producing literature to meet the needs and aspirations of readers. (14)

The following quotations from some field staff currently engaged in adult literacy programmes indicate some motivating factors:

"They are taking a renewed interest in the Council now that they can read the Council minutes in the Vernacular."

"They feel the classes help them economically because they can get better jobs when they read... especially those transferring to the English programme."

"Since we adopted the cultural method of teaching (the person mastering the skill and then passing it on to a relative or friend)- it has restored confidence in themselves and is having quite a social impact."

"We are publishing stories written by the new literates. This is making them aware that they are a lot more talented than they previously realised."

"They are now asking for vocational training."

"The ability to read and write letters is making parents less apprehensive about allowing their sons to work on the coast."

"Spiritual growth is evident since we have publised the Scriptures in the vernacular."

"Before parents used to ask their (school) children to read their letters. This was humiliating for the adults and a cause of 'bigheadedness' with the children. Now the parents are able to read and this has helped to restore much of their self-respect."

TRANSFERRING INTO A NATIONAL LANGUAGE

As a literacy programme progresses the new literates often request further training to enable them to transfer into a national language. This is the stage at which reading material is prepared for transfer from the vernacular language into either Pidgin or English.

The initiative should always come from the new reader and not from the instructor. Any suggestion of the imposition of a foreign language can be obnoxious to an adult and undermine motivation to continue reading.

Usually only a diglot or triglot phrase book is required. Most translators report that only about six hours is required to make the transfer to Pidgin. Several claim that transfer is an automatic process for any with a speaking knowledge of Pidgin. Transfer to English obviously requires an extended transition programme.

CONCLUSION

Illiteracy is a giant that can be slain in this country. There is now sufficient evidence to show that in a relatively short period illiteracy can be reduced in some cases substantially. (See Appendix 1 & 2). The cost per capita (graduates) is minimal⁽¹⁶⁾ but even if this were not so the economic development and political awareness resulting from the acquisition of reading and writing would more than compensate for the cost involved.

Who should accept responsibility for adult education in this country? I believe every local government council should accept this responsibility by initiating literacy programmes in the vernaculars, English, Pidgin or Police Motu. They should sponsor village libraries, employ instructors and supervisors and help meet the cost of certain types of literature. The Administration should provide realistic funds to channel through the Local Government Councils to subsidize these programmes. I am convinced that council sponsorship is important for the success of literacy programmes in this country.

The provision of adult education through literacy at the village level is going to be a major factor in the rural development of this nation. Other methods employing modern technology need to be investigated and adopted wherever practicable. However, literacy is still a tool with a sharp cutting edge.

FOOTNOTES

(1) The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

(2) Professor R.C. Theobald, "Communication and Change" Fifth Waigani Seminar.

(3) Refer to Seminar paper "The Lowa Marketing Co-operative Ltd. of Goroka" - D. Nicholls.

(4) The Agricultural Vocational School at Kamaliki, E.H.D. was featured in the Seminar in an illustrated talk "Who Wants Rural Education?" - C. Smith.

(5) Refer to Seminar Paper "Community Development in Indonesia" - Mrs. Rahayu Hanafish.

- (6) Territory of Papua and New Guinea, Population Census, 1966 Preliminary Bulletin No. 20. Bureau of Statistics, Konedobu, Papua.
- (7) The School of External Studies - mainly engaged in correspondence courses for ex-primary-school students.
- (8) UNESCO Report PRG 13 c/PRG 4, Sept. 1964, P.7.
- (9) Literacy Literature New Guinea has played an important role in this field. Soon to be wound-up as an organization its functions are to be continued by other bodies. The Christian Communications Commission is another liaison organization.
- (10) Materials available from S. I. L., Publications Department, Ukarumpa, The Christian Book Centre, Madang or the The Christian Bookshop, Wewak.
- (11) E. G. The Graged, Kate and Jaben schools run by the Lutheran Mission.
- (12) UNESCO 1953 "The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education". Monograph on Fundamental Education, Paris;
 Monograph Series on Languages and Linguistics No. 21 (article by Goarder); Fishman, Ferguson and Gupta, "Language Problems of Developing Nations" (articles by Bowers, Burns, Le Page and Rubin in Section IV; Nida, Eugene A (Jan-Mar 1949) "Approach to Reading Through the Native Language". Language Learning II, (1), 16-20; Castro de la Fluente, Anglican (1961). "La Alfabetizacion en Lenguas Indigenas y Los Promoteres Culturales". William Cameron Townsend, Mexico, D. F., Instituto Linguistico de Verano, pp 694; Harris, Joy Kinslow "Linguistics and Aboriginal Education"-Australian Territories, Vol 8, No.1, Feb. 1968 pp 25-34; Threllfall, Norman. "Cross-Culture Fruit Tree Study" Read Magazine, Vol.2 No.4 Oct.1967 pp5-7;
- (13) Furlong G. D. "Covers that Sell" "Read" Magazine Vol.6, No.3, July 1971.
- (14) Gwyther-Jones R. "Literature in a Basic Adult Education Programme" Read Magazine Vol.6, No.1, Jan. 1971.
- (15) Their hope is misplaced unless they go on to the English programme. R. G-J.
- (16) Instructors' salaries and all reading and writing materials ran out at about \$2-3 per graduate in Kanite and Fore programmes which received Local Government Council assistance.

APPENDIX I

S. I. L. PROGRAMMES NOT CURRENTLY RUNNING

<u>Language</u>	<u>Population</u>	<u>% Illiterate</u>	<u>Years Programme was running .</u>	<u>No. of Instructors.</u>	<u>No of Villages.</u>	<u>No. of Graduates</u>	<u>Reduction ⁽¹⁾ in Illiteracy.</u>
Usarufa (E. H. D.)	1,000	100%	1 year	6	2	200	20%
Fasu (S. H. D.)	700	100%	6 months	4	3	50	7.1%
Tairora (E. H. D.)	8,000	80% plus	4 years	2	2	200	3.1%
Managalasi (Northern)	4,000	85%	2 years	4	5	80	2.3%
Gahuku (E. H. D.)	6,000	85%	1 1/2	12	18	120	2.3%

Transfer material from vernacular to Pidgin or English has been provided in most of these programmes.

(1) Reduction in illiteracy not taking into account formal education or other programmes.

APPENDIX II

S. I. L. CURRENT PROGRAMMES

<u>Language</u>	<u>Population</u>	<u>% Illiterate at commencement of programme</u>	<u>Years current programme in progress</u>	<u>Students currently under instruction</u>	<u>No. of instructors</u>	<u>No. of villages</u>	<u>No. of graduates from previous programmes</u>	<u>Reduction in illiteracy</u> ⁽¹⁾
Kanite (E. H. D.)	18,000	85%	1 year	600 [#]	26	16	500	3.2%
Fore (E. H. D.)	12,000	90%	2 years	200	9	5	400	3.7%
Atzera (Morobe)	15,000	70%	\$	700	17	18	\$	\$
Wiru (S. H. D.)	15,000	100%	4 years	50-100	*	*	500	3.3%
Washkuk (E. S. D.)	3,000	\$	1 year	75	6	1	50	\$

* Traditional cultural teaching method employed. When a person acquires full skill in reading he selects a relative or friend to teach.

\$ No accurate figures available yet.

200 of these students are now in English transfer classes.

1 Reduction in illiteracy not taking into account formal education or other programmes.