

Production of Literacy Materials in Minor Languages

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India is a typical of multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic country. Since the country is so vast and its historical and geographical dimensions are responsible for her varied and diverse cultural pattern one learns to respect the variety and individually of the other in the interest of mutual growth.

Nearly twenty years ago a scholar of linguistics had undertaken a study to enumerate the mother tongues of Indian population. He came to a staggering figure of more than 1600! This huge figure posed serious problems before education, communications and administrations. During the long spell of 200 years of the British rule the official language of the country was English. After the Independence in August 1947 Hindi was declared official languages besides English. Not only that, the whole country has a number of language regions, and 15 major languages are declared official languages of those regions. The central academy of letters (Sahitya Akademi) gives annual awards to the most outstanding books of literacy merit in 22 languages. These languages are - Assamese, Bengali, Dogri, Gujarati, Hindi, Indian English, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Mithili, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Rajasthani, Sanskrit, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu. 7 languages viz., Dogri, Kashmiri, Konkani, Maithili, Manipuri, Nepali and Rajasthani, added to the main list of 15 major languages do not have their independent scripts. They use either the Devnagari script in which Hindi is written, or Bengali or Urdu. Some dialects even use Roman script.

National Book Trust, India is a national

organization devoted to promotion and publication of books since 1957. Its regular programme is conducted in 13 languages and lately it has added 3 more languages which have fairly independent growth of literature but do not have their own distinct script.

Literacy activities have flourished in more than 22 languages discussed above, only because education in mother tongue languages has always been encouraged in India.

In the book *Groundwork of Educational Theory*, Mr. J. M. Ros quotes Froebel's famous metaphor in which it is shown how the actual method of teaching consisting of manipulation of actual life and experiences of learners brings out the best in them. Here is an excerpt:

"... a plant will grow and achieve its own proper form unaided. But while each plant must develop according to the laws of its own nature, while it is impossible, for example, for a cabbage to develop into a rose, there is yet room for a gardener. A good gardener, by his art, sees to it that both his cabbage and his roses achieve the finest form possible. His efforts produce a finer result than would be achieved by the plant without him, yet, it is in the nature of the plant to achieve that result under suitable conditions. The naturalist may be content with briars but the idealist wants fine roses. So the educator by his efforts assist the educand, who is developing according to the law of nature, to attain levels that would otherwise be denied to him."

One is able to bring forth learner's spontaneity and power of self-expression

only in an environment that is natural and comfortable for her. That would give full play to her creative abilities and functional activities of mind and body. This is best done in learner's mother tongue.

Like India there are many other countries where official language of the country is not necessarily the language of many illiterates, particularly those who live in geographically difficult areas like hills and mountains, forest, isolated islands, deserts etc., and who are mainly tribal or belong to the deprived sections of the society. They require area-specific culture-specific material in their own language, with the visuals of the local environment. For example, in the central state of India known as Madhya Pradesh, the official language of the state is Hindi, but it is populated by numerous tribes and minority communities. The local agency engaged in literacy works decided to use the primer prepared at the state level in Hindi, the standard language of the state. The letter 'B' was introduced by the picture of a goat which in Hindi language is **Bakari**. But the word for goat in the mother tongue of learners was **Chheri**. So, instead of 'B' for **Bakari** they would always read as 'B' for **Chheri**! There were many such examples. Ultimately the functionaries had to rewrite the whole primer using local words, in which the word **Chheri** was used to introduce the letter **Chh** and not 'B'!

There is another example from the state of Haryana, very close to Delhi, the Capital of India. They used a word **Makaan** for a house. The use of the word **Makaan** means the same in Delhi and in Haryana but the house in Haryana looks very different from the house in Delhi! And therefore, the visuals were not acceptable to the learners!

The situation is all the more challenging in the mountain regions of north east frontier. In the state of Arunachal Pradesh there are 23 recognized dialects. The Central Institute of Indian Languages has produced

primers for school children but no suitable material is available for adult literacy programme. The official language of the state is English and Hindi is taught as a second language in school. Obviously, the spoken and official languages are not reconcilable. There is no commonality, except the script, which is Roman. According to 1991 census there are 402,000 illiterates in Arunachal Pradesh aged 7 years and above, in which 182,000 are men and 220,000 are female.

Another north eastern state is Manipur. Its main language is Manipuri written in Bengali script. There are 26 main spoken languages and some of them use Roman script. Illiterate population above the age of 7 is 573,000 in which 372,000 are women.

The State of Nagaland has more intricate problem. It has 16 official languages! Literacy material developed in AO Naga language which is one of the 16, is not acceptable to others.

All these regions and many other around them require specific content based on their own socio-cultural environment and life pattern. To conduct a time-bound area specific literacy programme one can think of three different models:

1. A transfer model can be prepared in which there would be a transfer from the spoken language to the state or official language. The first primer would have all the words from the spoken language. This transition would require supplementary reading material to reinforce and stabilize literacy skills.

Transfer model would be feasible only if the script used for the state and spoken languages is the same.

2. A common base model can be prepared by choosing one dialect understood by all the speakers in the region of many

dialects. Care will have to be taken that it reconciles socio-cultural aspects. This model would require post-literacy material in the same language and script. Sometimes a new script is developed for the spoken languages having no script of their own. But this creates more problems as one is not sure about the scientific development of the script. It is always better to adopt one of the existing scripts, preferably of that region. It can be slightly modified to suit the requirement and give all identity of its own, if necessary.

3. A bilingual model can have the spoken and state language in the same primer in the same script. If the script of the spoken language is different, the primer would have two different scripts. This model would take more time and increase the teaching load.
4. When a learner learns in her own language she can understand what she hears. She is already familiar with the vocabulary, grammar, idiom, diction etc. of her own language. She can express herself freely. She only has to make effort to learn to read and write. Therefore, it is the visual symbols, grapheme, on which she has to concentrate. But if she has to learn a new language she may not understand what she hears and may not be able to express her difficulties or views, her own limitations would slow down her learning process.

There are also cases where learners do not want literacy skills in their spoken languages, they know that it would limit their scope and would deprive them of wider communication. Such learners can be made literate in their state language because they are already motivated. They are ready to put in extra effort.

It is a government policy in India to provide textbooks in mother tongue wherever the

number of people speaking a particular language is 100,000. Since India is so thickly populated there are many spoken languages in which primer and textbooks are in spoken language. Transition to official language begins from class 3. National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) has taken up the task of providing resource support.

Earlier in this paper I have talked about Arunachal Pradesh. It has one dialect called Adl. They use Roman script. Primers for them are prepared in Roman. In some places where there is no script textbooks are prepared either in Devnagari script or the script of the state language. If the teacher does not teach in the mother tongue of her pupils she is not able to communicate. It has been established by the NCERT experiences that using language other than the mother tongue creates a barrier between the teacher and the taught.

In some areas where the primers could not be developed in spoken languages due to the lack of resource, teachers are advised to take standard primer and prepare a list of local words against each one. Sometimes they prepare lessonwise list and fix additional pages at the back of their standard primers, and give a note for teachers in the beginning of the book that they should go through the list of words given at the back thoroughly and carefully, and teach each lesson by replacing standard words by the spoken words.

Each primer comprises four parts. Part I of the book is for teachers. It spells out objectives and instructions. Part II has learning material. Part III has workbook, and Part IV consists of unit tests. Learning material, workbook and tests must have local examples picked up from local flora and fauna, and from daily life of local communities.

The success of formal system in spoken language areas has inspired the Directorate

of Adult Education, Department of Education under the Ministry of Human Resource Development to pay special attention to North-Eastern States, Jammu & Kashmir, and some areas of Rajasthan where adult literacy programme is yet to take off due to the nature of terrain, resulting in communication problems. It has been agreed that “to begin with only those spoken languages may be taken up which are spoken by more than 100,000 people in the country and which have at least 5,000 illiterate learners in the State, unless there is a need and demand from substantial number of people.” Which means that even if the number is less than 5,000, if the people demand they should be provided with the literacy material.

The task of developing basic literacy material may be taken up as follows:

1. Identify major spoken languages with the number of speakers in the areas.
2. Identify the languages in which the desired material may be developed on priority basis.
3. Decide modalities relating to preparation of primers in spoken languages, preferably with a switch over mechanism to the official or state language.
4. Orient writers in developing Primers.

The selected writer should know the official or state language; and also the spoken language of the area. She should be well aware of the most frequent vocabulary, socio-cultural life of the area, social values, traditions, beliefs, needs and interests of the people and also development programmes of the region. It would be best to select the writers from the area for which the material is developed.

To make a time bound and cost effective programme special attention is needed on the content of learning, and visibility and measurability of learning. Like any other literacy programme the present one would also require pre-literacy material, basic

literacy material, teaching material and special supplementary material.

With adequate technical know-how and human approach, however difficult it may seem, one can certainly hope for success.