Making Readers literate: Transition Literacy in Sub-Saharan Africa[1]

by Barbara Trudell

1. Introduction

When SIL linguists and educators began work over 50 years ago, their programs targeted the isolated preliterate peoples of the world. Hidden away in the remote mountains of southern Mexico and Central America, the vast Amazon rain forest, the steep valleys of Papua New Guinea, and elsewhere, these groups were the focus in the formative years of SIL policy and practice. Such groups share a number of characteristics: they do not speak the language of wider communication (LWC) of the country; they are truly preliterate—there exists no written culture to build on in any language; they usually have no access to national or regional-level infrastructures, which provide the rest of the country with such services as formal education and health care. Literacy and education activities in areas like these are based on mother-tongue literacy instruction, extensive preliteracy work, and often the basic principles of public health. Some programs offer instruction in LWC language acquisition and literacy to some degree, when the target group feels the need.

However, in the last few decades SIL fieldworkers have often encountered a quite different situation: people groups whose mother tongue is not written or used in education, but who have been exposed to some extent to print and education in a second language. These groups are often larger than the preliterate groups, and their contact with the outside world has been more extensive. Many of the people groups of Africa fall into this second category. Most people may be functionally illiterate, but usually a significant percentage has participated in the nonindigenous society to some extent: gaining facility in the LWC, attending school (sometimes even through university), and so becoming more or less literate. This is how people may come to be literate in a second language but not in their first language.

Transition literacy, the transfer of reading ability in one language to a comparable ability in another, can be a useful literacy strategy for preliterate, monolingual groups as well as for more exposed, bilingual groups. For the former, the transition is from L1 literacy to L2 literacy.[2] For the latter, the direction of transition is the other way, from L2 to L1.[3] The assumptions and strategies involved in the two types of transition literacy are different.

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[2] Different terms have been used to describe the two kinds of transition literacy, including "transfer" and "bridge materials." For the purposes of this article, the term TRANSITION is used to describe the general strategy; the terms "L1–L2" and "L2–L1" are used to specify the direction of transition.

[3] L1 refers to first language (mother tongue) and L2 refers to second language.

2. L1-L2 transition

Transition literacy from L1 to L2 requires a target population that is fully literate (able to read with comprehension) in their mother tongue, and also able to speak and understand the L2. The idea that L2 literacy instruction will in itself lead to fluency in the L2 is erroneous, though surprisingly widespread. Programs in Africa that successfully include L1–L2 transition literacy generally precede it with oral second language instruction. For example, the literacy program operated by the Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation (GILLBT) consists of four stages: initial and advanced mother tongue literacy, oral English as a second language (ESL) instruction, and finally mother tongue-to-English transition literacy.

Similarly, the PROPELCA (Projet de Recherche Operationnelle pour l'Enseignement de Langues au Cameroun; Operational Research Project for Language Education in Cameroon) program of bilingual children's education in Cameroon includes components of both oral second language acquisition and L1–L2 transition literacy. Among the Ngbaka of northwestern Zaire, the advanced stages of the adult literacy program also include oral French as a second language (FSL) instruction and transition literacy from Ngbaka to French.

Interest in L1–L2 transition literacy can be economic, social, or prestige related. In many cases, L2 fluency and literacy directly affect one's ability to carry out trade advantageously with nonspeakers of L1. Participation in the local or national political system may also require L2 literacy. These motivational factors vary with the degree of isolation in which the L1-speaking group lives.

3. L2–L1 transition

Transition literacy from L2 to L1 is somewhat more complex. Generally speaking, it assumes fluency (both oral and written) in the L2; however, the extent and manner in which L1 speakers have been exposed to the L2 (and so become "literate") cannot always be taken for granted. In cases where the L1-speaking child has had an L2 immersion-type experience in school, it is quite possible that the literacy skills acquired do not include text comprehension, simply because the child does not speak the L2 well enough at the time to acquire that skill. This situation can bring about the phenomenon of "semiliteracy," that is, when a person can identify letters, decode some words, and perhaps read orally by sounding out the text, but lacks the higher level skills of text comprehension and analysis. Indeed, semiliterates often do not even expect reading to be meaningful.

Teaching the L2 semiliterate to read in his own language can therefore be a very rewarding process, since the element missing in his ability to read the L2—language fluency—is fully present in the L1. The discovery that reading in the L1 conveys such a richness of meaning is often a delightful surprise to the new reader.

Another common result of an L2–L1 transition program is an increase in the prestige accorded to the L1. L1 speakers in situations of intense L2 language and culture contact often disparage their backgrounds, having acquired the idea from the L2 society that their mother tongue is impossible to read or write. Since in these cases the L1 is seldom used in formal education, there is the tendency to consider the language—and by extension, the associated culture and its people—as less valuable

than the L2. Development of an orthography, literature, and a readership in the L1 challenges the attitude that downgrades the L1 as "not a worthy language."

L2–L1 transition literacy instruction is a strategy widely used by SIL and its affiliates in many areas of sub-Saharan Africa, including Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Zaire, Ethiopia, and Kenya, among other countries. As a way to establish L1 literacy relatively quickly, L2–L1 programs are usually more immediately productive than traditional L1 literacy programs. Because the target population is usually more educated and is at least semiliterate already, much less remains to be taught. Transition programs of this kind have been found to be very useful for developing mother tongue authors, finding teachers for subsequent L1 literacy instruction programs, and raising awareness of the possibility of L1 literacy among the general population.

The remainder of this article focuses on L2–L1 transition materials and instruction, giving examples from several programs sponsored by SIL entities or their affiliates in Africa.

4. The L2–L1 transition program

L2–L1 literacy instruction can take many forms, from a simple oral or written description of the differences between the two written languages, to a full course complete with instructor and textbook. In actual practice, the overall L2–L1 transition program for a people group may include several strategies for various target groups.

The simplest type of organized transition program consists in making and distributing a chart or booklet of the L1 alphabet. Such a publication may also include short explanations of specific L1 letters or letter combinations which are either not found in the L2 or else have different values in the two languages. The chart or booklet is distributed among the target audience in some way and may be accompanied by a short orientation session with those who are already L2 literate. This kind of strategy works well when the target audience is highly literate in the L2 and needs minimal orientation to assimilate the information presented. One drawback to using this strategy exclusively is that the results can be difficult to track due to its lack of formal instruction. In addition, there is no opportunity offered to practice the new letters.

A more elaborate strategy incorporates the alphabet chart into a larger book, including such activities as practice drills and reading practice in L1. A publication like this can be distributed as is, although it is generally preferable to devise some sort of orientation or training session for the target audience. One advantage of training sessions is that they allow the program leader to see how easily and effectively the materials convey the desired information. Based on such observation, materials can be constructed and modified to optimally match each target audience. Orientation or training sessions can last from a few hours to several days, depending on how quickly the audience learns. This kind of strategy assumes that the L2 reader is not likely to internalize L2 versus L1 differences or become a fluent L1 reader on his or her own, but he will need some personal instruction to reach this goal.

The most elaborate transition literacy program includes a transition primer, follow-up materials, teachers trained in transition literacy instruction, and regularly scheduled classes. A program like this is most useful in an area where large numbers of marginally literate or semiliterate L2 readers want

to learn to read their mother tongue. Large scale transition literacy programs can do a great deal to enhance the prestige of the L1 in a community.

Different target audiences require different strategies for L2–L1 transition to be accomplished. An overall transition literacy program may use several different options simultaneously to reach its goal. Transition literacy instruction may form part of larger-scale programs of teacher training, writer training, instruction in practical math and accounting, local leadership development, and even university instruction.

5. Transition materials

The content of L2–L1 transition literacy materials varies widely with the languages and audiences involved. However, the following items generally need to be covered in a complete transition primer:

a. "New" letters (found in L1 but not L2; can include long vowels)

b. Letters whose shape is the same in both languages, but whose value is different in the two

c. Unfamiliar letter combinations (for example, digraphs)

d. Tone markings or other diacritics, in the cases where L1 has them but L2 does not

e. Syllable patterns found in L1 which are not found in L2

Some transition materials also teach some of the more important morphemes in the language, especially those which are prefixes or suffixes. In addition, practice reading material in L1 should to be provided. It is preferable that initial L1 reading material be relatively easy, if possible (in terms of such criteria as word length, syllable structure, and complexity of content), and that it also be natural in style and content to the L1 culture. Later L1 reading material need not be restricted in its content, complexity, or style.

The elaborateness of transition materials required for a given language depends on several factors: its orthographic complexity, the degree of orthographic and phonological similarity between L2 and L1, the level of education of the target audience, and the extent to which the orthography of L1 reflects accurately the phonology of the language. Underdifferentiated or overdifferentiated orthographics can be very difficult to read, for L2 literates as well as new readers.

One important orthographic factor in the elaborateness required of transition materials concerns the script(s) used by L1 and L2. In most areas of sub-Saharan Africa, indigenous languages have been reduced to writing using the script of the local LWC. This certainly facilitates transition between the two. However in Ethiopia, where Ethiopic script (used in Amharic, for many years the official language of education and government) has been the LWC model for other minority languages, educators and minority language speakers today find themselves in a dilemma. The current national government is committed to developing education and literature in the various minority languages of the country, and minority ethnic groups are being encouraged to choose either Ethiopic or Roman script for this development. For various political and social reasons, some groups are choosing

Roman script for the further development of their languages. This choice clearly has ramifications for the many Amharic literates, who know Ethiopic script (actually a syllabary) but not Roman script. These literates, often quite educated, are reduced to virtual illiteracy in their own languages. For such people, some kind of transition materials will be needed not only from Amharic to L1 literacy, but from Ethiopic to Roman script literacy. For groups that choose to develop their languages in Ethiopic script, transition from Amharic will be significantly easier.

6. Examples of L2–L1 transition materials in Africa

A wide variety of L2–L1 transition materials are currently in use in Africa, some examples of which are mentioned here. These examples demonstrate the flexibility of the genre, as well as the different target audiences and topics covered.

6.1. The alphabet chart

The alphabet chart may seem like a trivial bit of reading, but in fact it is quite important to an L2–L1 literacy program for two reasons. One reason is that such a chart signals the establishment of an orthography in L1, no small advance for a previously unwritten language. The other reason is that often the alphabet chart is the first clear indication to the L1-speaking population that their mother tongue can in fact be written; this is a revelation to educated and uneducated L1 speakers alike.

For this reason, an alphabet chart may be the first piece of transition literacy material to be produced. This has been the case in the Kibudu transition literacy program of northeastern Zaire. Published by the Projet de Traduction de la Bible in 1990, the 11-by-14-inch chart is printed on colored card stock and features the nine vowels and 32 consonants in the Kibudu orthography. Each letter is presented in a box with a picturable word beginning with that letter; the word is pictured in a small sketch. Most alphabet charts follow this same pattern, varying in size according to the intended use of the charts (larger sizes for use in classrooms; smaller sizes for wide-scale distribution).

Some alphabet charts in fact become alphabet booklets with each letter and picture featured on a page or half page. These booklets may be complete as such, or they may include some easy reading practice in L1 at the end. L'alphabet Ifè, published by the Equipe Ifè of SIL in Togo is such a booklet. Alphabet booklets are often very popular as an early L1 publication.

6.2. The self-teaching primer

The goal of self-teaching transition materials is to avoid the necessity of organized classroom instruction. Self-teaching materials should be tailored carefully to the intended audience so as to require minimum explanation. For the less sophisticated L2 reader, it is best to avoid using the L2 extensively in the primer and to avoid technical or linguistic vocabulary. Extensive use of pictures and familiar topics in the primer is recommended. These materials may be introduced to a population by means of orientation or training sessions, but the sessions would probably not extend to organized, multi-meeting courses or trained teachers.

One example of materials which could be used without a teacher is *Kusoma Chiduruma na T'adize* (Reading Duruma and its Proverbs), prepared for the Duruma people of eastern Kenya who already read Swahili (the LWC of the area). The primer, published in 1988 by the Kenyan organization Bible Translation and Literacy has three parts. The Duruma alphabet is presented first with small pictures and keywords accompanying each of 36 letters. The nine Duruma letters that are not in the Swahili alphabet are listed on the opposite page. The next 20 pages of the primer teach these nine new letters, primarily by contrasting them with known Swahili letters which are similar in shape (for example, teaching *t'* by contrasting it with *t*). Pictures of keywords, lists of Duruma words beginning with the two contrastive letters, and sentences using the new letter are used in each lesson. The final section of the book consists of 30 Duruma proverbs presented as reading practice for the new L1 reader. Virtually no Swahili is used in the entire book, although its construction is based on the assumption of at least some level of fluency in reading Swahili.

The *Cours de Lecture Ifè,* written for the Ifè people of Togo, is another interesting example of such materials. Included are the 15 "new" Ifè letters, treatment of tone and nasalization, and practice of a few key morphemes. The lessons contain pictures of keywords, syllable drills, and extensive reading practice in Ifè.

Self-teaching materials of this kind seem to work best when L1 and L2 are not too different from each other (as is the case with Duruma and Swahili, both of which are Bantu languages). When a limited number of new letters are the primary difference between the two orthographies, L2–L1 transition is at its easiest. On the other hand, when tone markings, letters with different values, or large numbers of new letter and digraphs are involved, better success is usually found in a more structured instructional setting.

6.3. Transition primers for class use

As already mentioned, a more elaborate transition literacy program often includes regularly scheduled classes with a transition primer and trained instructors. A program like this is most useful for a target audience that is numerous and is comprised of marginally literate or semiliterate L2 readers. The transition primer used in this context can be as slowly paced as necessary and can include minimal L2 explanation in the text.

Such programs usually also make use of teacher training materials or a teacher's guide for the transition primer. The teacher's guide gives directions for teaching the transition primer lesson by lesson, and it usually assumes that the teacher has a fair degree of L2 fluency.

Examples of a transition primer and teacher's guide can be found in the transition program currently operating among the Mangbetu of northeastern Zaire. The primer, Amaabhɔ Nemangbetu (First Mangbetu Reader), and its accompanying teacher's guide, were prepared by members of the Zairian organization Projet de Traduction Biblique en Dialectes Mangbetu in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The primer begins with a review of the letters common to both Mangbetu and Bangala (the LWC for this area). Subsequent lessons are dedicated to teaching tone marking, new letters (including digraphs and trigraphs), and the particular use of some letters for grammatical purposes in Mangbetu. Extensive use is made of syllable and sentence drills and practice reading. Each lesson

generally contains one descriptive picture as well. The primer finishes with a story in Mangbetu and a two-page presentation of the entire 44-letter Mangbetu alphabet.

The teacher's guide to this primer is written in Bangala and gives step-by-step directions for teaching each lesson. The guide uses a limited amount of linguistic and technical terminology to describe certain grammatical features of the language. Content questions concerning the final story in the primer are included in the guide as well.

Another interesting example of transition materials which are used in formal classes is the set of primers developed for the Ngiti language of Zaire. Published by the Projet de Traduction Ndruna (Ngiti) in 1993, this set of materials has several features which reflect the unique nature of Ngiti language and orthography. The most salient is its treatment of tone. Ngiti has four tones, three of which are marked orthographically (French and Swahili, the LWCs in the area, have none). Since tone carries a high functional load in Ngiti, this is the first topic taught in the primer series. The SIL literacy consultant to the project considers that the Ngiti L2 reader needs a thorough understanding of how tone is written in his mother tongue before attempting to master other aspects of Ngiti writing. In addition, the entire third volume of the series is devoted to the more complex grammatical and lexical uses of tone. The goal of this volume is to raise the Ngiti readers' awareness of the functions of tone in his language. Clearly these materials go beyond merely describing orthographic differences between L1 and L2. Other features contained in the Ngiti transition primer series are the letters which are used in L1 but not in the LWCs of the area; these include several vowels and a number of digraphs and trigraphs.

The primary technique used to teach all of these lessons is contrast. Nothing new is presented in isolation, but rather it is presented in contrast to something known. The lessons are structured similarly throughout the series in order to make teaching easier. Syllable and word drills, reading practice, and some pictures make up each lesson. (The first book has far more pictures than the second; the last book has none.) Teaching the series has proven to take about 20 hours of class instruction for Swahili literates. This is quite a bit, compared to other languages which can get by with an hour or two of orientation, and it indicates something of the complexity of the Ngiti orthography compared to those of the LWCs.

Some L2–L1 transition materials are suitable either for use in a classroom or by individuals. One example is the *Manuel pour Lire et Ecrire la Langue Ngyemboon*, written for the Ngyemboon language of Cameroon. The transition primer presents the new letters and tonal markings, and it reinforces learning with sentence translation exercises, fill-in-the-blank exercises, and copious amounts of practice reading in Ngyemboon. Some French is used for explanations but little technical linguistic vocabulary is utilized. The clear layout and large number of exercises in each lesson make this a good self-teaching book, although it could easily be adapted to classroom use as well.

6.4. The spelling or writing guide

Guides to writing L1 are generally directed at relatively well educated, fluent L2 literates. The main body of the text is usually written in L2, and technical terms are often used to explain the unique aspects of L1 writing. The writing guides nevertheless assume L1 oral fluency and may describe a

letter's sound as "like in the word [L1 word]." Writing guides are not generally taught in formal classes, although they may be used as a reference help in training new L1 authors.

The spelling guide for the Bété language of Côte d'Ivoire, *Lisons le Bété*, targets Bété speakers who are fluent in written French. The guide is divided in to ten lessons; each lesson includes exercises to reinforce the material taught. Extensive use is made of French linguistic terms throughout the guide. A particularly interesting feature of this guide is its treatment of ATR3 vowels.[4] Bété has a set of six advanced and six retracted vowels, and the guide treats them in Lesson 3 through Lesson 5.

Another example of such a guide is *Chiirnaan Mujjunkiissa*, the Rendille Spelling Guide. This 20-page booklet was developed at a writers' workshop held in 1989 among the Rendille people of northern Kenya and published by Bible Translation and Literacy in 1990. Topics covered include tone, vowel and consonant length, contractions, proper names, loan words, word division, clitics, postpositions, and punctuation. Fairly technical language and a sophisticated level of English (the LWC of the area) characterize the text. This publication is much more a reference work than a primer, but it does fall within the camp of "L2–L1 transition materials."

Other noteworthy spelling guides include *Je Lis Karaboro*, for the Karaboro language of Burkina Faso; *En Avant pour le Toussian*, for the Toussian language also of Burkina Faso; *Nous Lisons le Ben*, for Ben speakers of Côte d'Ivoire; and *Lisons le Wobè*, for the Wobè language of Côte d'Ivoire. All of these languages except Karaboro are tonal, and various methods are employed to reach tone and other unique characteristics of the languages in question.

Two examples of less sophisticated spelling guides are the *Manuel Pour Lire et Ecrire la Langue Kako*, written for the Kako language of Cameroon and the *Guide de Lecture Abidji*, written for the Abidji language of Côte d'Ivoire. Though these texts include extensive use of French, the presentation of the material uses less linguistic terminology and presents linguistic concepts (such as tone) in a more informal way.

7. Conclusion

Making readers literate, that is what transition literacy is all about. L1–L2 transition literacy introduces the isolated minority language speaker to a world of information and ideas outside his own culture; L2–L1 literacy restores to the L2 reader his cultural and linguistic heritage. Both have a significant role to play in literacy programs among the minority language groups of the world.

References

Halle, Morris, and G. N. Clements. 1983. *Problem book in phonology: A workbook for introductory courses in linguistics and in modern phonology*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

[4] Editor's Note: ATR = ADVANCED TONGUE ROOT [± ATR]. "As its name implies, this feature is implemented by drawing the root of the tongue forward, enlarging the pharyngeal cavity and often raising the tongue body as well, [- ATR] sounds do not involve this gesture. ([+ ATR] vowels such as [i, u, e, o] versus [- ATR] vowels such as [ɪ, ʊ, ɛ, ʌ, a].)" (Halle and Clements 1983:7).