

Literacy resources and cultural appropriacy

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Mary's workshop centred on her experience as a co-author of commercially-produced language-teaching books, and especially her work with a Nigerian publisher aiming to produce literacy materials for Hausa-medium schools in Northern Nigeria. Hausa is spoken by some 35 million people as a first language, and by many more as a second language.

She first considered some of the issues around the creation of resources, such as charity vs business purposes, the parameters of government policies (especially with regard to syllabus constraints, approval of books, purchase and distribution). In a predominantly non-literate village society, parents may have difficulty with the motivation for literacy, and indeed the loss of income incurred by school attendance, not to mention the cost of school uniforms despite nominally free education. Whatever the status of literacy – being able to work in an office, manage business accounts, aspire to a different life – many of these factors are seriously demotivating for subsistence farmers and their families.

Any commercial production of literacy materials must involve economies of scale, which usually means targeting the 'lowest common denominator': the more users who will buy the materials, the greater the potential profit. This has to be balanced against the cost of investment in design, colour printing, and in marketing and distribution personnel - not to mention authors and editors.

Local culture plays a key part in the process of developing and distributing materials. It is essential to correctly depicting local dress and customs, for example, and the place of the written word in the wider society is obviously a key factor, as are exams - which are often perceived as the ladder upwards towards 'success'. If there are newspapers to be read, text messages and computers available for communication, and poetry and stories to be enjoyed, then the motivation for learning may be greater.

Where a language such as Hausa is actually the second or third language of a community, many other issues arise – such as conflicting orthographies for different related or contiguous languages. Some may, for example use doubling to show long vowels or consonants, others may not do so. How transferable is literacy in a second language to mother-tongue speakers of another language? And how much motivation is there to become literate in any language if it is not also used for college and higher education, or in government?

In northern Nigeria, there are palpable tensions between methodologies and motivations: the tradition of Islamic teaching fosters reading and writing of the Quran in *ajami*, the local adaptation of Arabic script. Not only is this in apparent 'competition' with western style education (the 'boko', or book-learning, of the boko haram sect); it is also a template for teaching and learning styles that are often carried across to the apparently more western-style classroom. Rote-learning, with its implications of obedience and rigour, is preferred – and is 'safer' and easier for the teachers to deliver – than any education that involves fun and expressions of individuality.

Mary's seminar engendered a wide discussion about community literacy, different types of literacy, and the sense of confirmation of identity in a wider world than the here-and-now. The implicit empowerment of better health and greater participation are all powerful motivators, if suitable materials, a receptive culture, and appropriate technology are available.

Mary showed some examples from the books she has been involved with: just a couple of pages are reproduced here, for interest.



The seminar concluded with a critical look at some literacy books in other languages (many of them minority African languages): participants were encouraged to consider these from the point of view of cover design, layout, headings, pedagogy and pictures, and the cultural appropriacy of their content and appearance.