



Literacy Innovations



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International Literacy Institute

E d i t o r i a l

Languages and Literacy

Multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception in the large majority of today's countries. Contact between peoples and languages is as old as history itself, and indeed has been a key element in many of the most important historical events of both industrialized and developing nations. Thus, it is no surprise that language should be at the heart of literacy education today. Language, literacy, and power are intimately intertwined.

In the classrooms of many developing countries, a significant proportion of children are either illiterate in their mother tongue or receive only a few years of mother tongue instruction before a second (usually international) language is introduced as a medium of instruction. It is well-known that poor second language literacy proficiency is a principal cause of high repetition and wastage rates, and of low achievement in academic subjects in primary and secondary schools. This result has had profound consequences for employment and other outcomes of schooling. The situation for adult literacy is at least as complicated. Virtually all education programs for adults are voluntary, and language choice is often subject to the varied motivations of learners, some of whom are interested in job promotion (where an international language might be desired), while others are motivated by a desire to write letters to their families (where a local language might be needed).

Because of the significant political aspects of first and second language policy, many donor agencies and policymakers have been reluctant to review language policies as they affect literacy work. There is no question that issues of politics and power come into the question of "which language/literacy should come first," as described in the writings of Freire (see Literacy Watch, on page 2 of this newsletter). There are other important issues as well, such as: (a) whether (or under what conditions) mother tongue literacy should be a precondition for the introduction of second language literacy in school-based and non-formal settings; (b) how the implementation of language of instruction policies affects literacy after schooling; (c) what are the effects of using second language literacy in school on wastage and grade repetition; and (d) what are the implications of using the second language literacy for academic subjects like mathematics, science, health, nutrition, and agriculture. Some of these topics are taken up in the various articles in this issue of *Literacy Innovations*, while others will require considerable investigation over the coming years. Improving the effectiveness of literacy programs in multilingual societies will require as much clear thinking and talent as this field can produce.

ARABIC LITERACY: Literacy, Diglossia, and Standardization in the Arabic-Speaking Region

Language-related issues seem to be greatly implicated in the apparent degradation of the quality of education in the Middle East and North Africa. The Arab Region Literacy Seminar, which was organized in Cairo on February 23-25, 1997 by the International Literacy Institute, addressed this concern in the meeting topic of *Literacy, Language, and Basic Education in the Arab Region*.

There was general agreement at the Cairo meeting that the low learning achievement rates in schools in many Arab countries are directly related to the difficulty of learning to read in the Arabic language. It was suggested that language planning policy and pedagogical reforms can make Arabic less difficult and more relevant for children and adults. The purpose of this brief article is to examine the prevailing diglossic situation in the region, and to link it to the issue of the standardization of the Arabic language for improved educational achievement.

The standardization of Arabic, which began in the 8th and 9th centuries AD, produced a well-defined set of norms that the early Arab grammarians called *fusha* ("eloquent" in English). These early language planning measures helped define the rules of the Arabic language, giving predominance to the written standard as the prestige language of the Quranic tradition and literary heritage, and equating *fusha* with written standard Arabic. Over the course of many centuries, the continued use of this favored set of written linguistic norms led to substantial differences between the written and the spoken forms of Arabic, and engendered the notion that the now codified written standard was the 'real language,' and that all other varieties of it were degenerate and corrupt versions. Standardization led to a marked role differentiation and to separate and changing functions within and across diversified Arab societies. The differentiation was between two related varieties of Arabic: *fusha* (always used for formal or "high" functions, such as prayers, speeches, or lectures) and dialect or vernacular (usually used for "low" functions, such as family discourse or trade and market conversations). This situation, which is known in linguistics literature as *diglossia*, gives *fusha* special prestige valuation. *Fusha* is, however, nobody's

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LITERACY WATCH

Paulo Freire—In Memoriam

Recently, we learned of the passing of Paulo Freire. Freire was perhaps the best known international personality who advocated, supported, and wrote about the educational rights and literacy rights of the world's poorest peoples.

Freire was born on September 19, 1921 in Recife, Brazil. He said of his parents that it was they who taught him at an early age to prize dialogue and to respect the choices of others—these were to be key elements in his understanding of adult education.

After passing the bar, he quickly abandoned law as a means of earning a living in order to go to work as a welfare official in the State of Pernambuco. His experiences during those years of public service brought him into direct contact with the urban poor. The educational and organizational assignments he undertook there led him to begin to formulate a means of communicating with the dispossessed that would later develop into his “dialogical method” for adult education. His involvement in adult education also included directing seminars in the history and philosophy of education at the University of Recife, where he was awarded a doctoral degree in 1959.

In the early 1960s, while Brazil was in the midst of political ferment and heightened expectations, Freire became the director of the University of Recife's Cultural Extension Service, offering literacy programs to rural peasants. Freire and his coworkers rejected the simple teaching of the decontextualized skills of reading and writing, but rather promoted participation in the political process. Freire won the attention of the poor and awakened their hope that they could start to have a say in the day-to-day decisions that affected their lives. Freire's methods were clearly politicizing and he came into conflict with the Brazilian military. As progressive movements were suppressed, Freire was briefly thrown into jail for his “subversive” activities. He was expelled from Brazil to Chile, where worked with the adult education programs of the Eduardo Frei government and attracted international attention. Freire's theory of continuing education and liberation goes far beyond literacy methodology to cover all forms of education.

In 1970, Freire completed his famous work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and later served with the World Council of Churches in Switzerland, assisting the literacy programs of newly independent countries. In 1979, he was invited back by the Brazilian government to a faculty position at the University of Sao Paulo, and in 1988 he became Minister of Education for the City of Sao Paulo.

Freire was the recipient of the UNESCO International Literacy Prize (1975) and the UNESCO Prize for Peace. From 1987 to 1995, he was a member of the Jury of the International Literacy Prizes.

In one of his last major addresses, at ILI's World Conference on Literacy, held in Philadelphia in March 1996, Freire spoke with joy and sobriety about the end of his life:

I am now almost 75 years old, and sometimes I am listening to the Freire of 40 years ago. But I have changed a lot, every day! When I was young, I was a curious boy; and now I am a curious old man. My curiosity never stops. Maybe in the last moments of my life I will be curious to know what it means to die. ■

(Part of this text was adapted from *Paulo Freire: His Life, Works and Thought* by Denis Collins, as reproduced at the website of National-Louis University <<http://nlu.nl.edu/ace/Resources/Freire.html>>.)

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mother tongue and almost never used at home in the Arab world; it is only learned through schooling and used exclusively at outside official or formal functions. The native dialect or vernacular variety of Arabic is typically acquired as a mother tongue and continues to be used almost exclusively in speech throughout adulthood and life.

The above compartmentalization of the two major Arabic language varieties places *fusha*, the sole language of first literacy acquisition and educational learning, outside the immediate daily activities of the learners, children or adults. *Fusha* is thus disconnected from the reality of expressive functions, reduced in its relevance and motivation for learners. This situation creates a phenomenon called *linguistic distance*, which can lead to serious educational and social consequences. Because it is highly differentiated grammatically and lexically from its dialectal counterpart, *fusha* is difficult to learn and use. The formality of *fusha* and its predominance in the written mode add to the difficulty surrounding its use in and out of the school environment. While all children painlessly and inevitably learn their local vernacular or colloquial dialect of Arabic, only those who have access to the benefits of formal schooling may learn *fusha*, thereby acquiring socioeconomic gains as well as social mobility. Since the acquisition of *fusha* is connected to socioeconomic advancement, the persistence of that variety of Arabic is a significant cause of social inequality.

Many language scholars and education specialists have claimed that diglossia in the Arab region should be blamed for the persistence of low literacy and the low levels of educational attainment that are reflected by frequent repetition, drop-out, and non-completion rates. Others have blamed the complexities of *fusha* itself. This opinion gap is not fortuitous. Many Arab specialists and policymakers have, until now, avoided accepting the existence of diglossia, feeling it could be a source of educational inequity. They acknowledge the existence of only one “Arabic language,” which is the common language of pan-Arab communication (a de facto *lingua franca* of all Arabs), the official language of the Arab States, and the dominant language of first literacy and formal instruction. The “Arabic language” that they usually refer to is in reality an ambiguous and difficult-to-define abstraction. It comprises the old and new language norms and standards and the linguistic varieties of Arabic.

To use the taxonomy common in linguistics, *fusha* is an ill-defined linguistic system of considerable indistinctness. It is a complex mix between (a) the classical forms of the language derived from the holy text of the Quran, also known as Classical Arabic (CA); (b) the written language of early standardization, a variety that is usually associated with literary discourse also known as Literary Arabic (LA); and finally, (c) a modern ‘blended’ variety of both CA and LA also known as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which emerged mostly from the recent development of journalism and the ubiquitous spread of mass-media in the Arab region. Thus, there is really no single standardized version of the Arabic language today, though the myth of a standardized Arabic does exist and causes untold

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problems. When transferred to the classroom in formal and/or non-formal interaction, this mix of Arabic language patterns leads to serious pedagogical problems and even feelings of linguistic insecurity among high numbers of learners.

Of course, most Arabs view their language as sacred and want to safeguard its original purity and unity from any form of potential deviation. This explains not only opposition to attempts at Arabic language reform, but also the ideology of validating and preserving cultural and historical uniqueness by having a highly pronounced sensitivity for linguistic purism and a low level of tolerance for mistakes and errors of language use. However, the time may be coming for greater acknowledgment that linguistic uniformity can be not only misleading but also detrimental to development goals. In a quest for a larger homogeneous speech community and for a common language of unification, the Arab region has stressed the political potentiality of a single language, but has ignored the resulting limitations for literacy and educational development.

Naturally, such language issues are sensitive for both religious and political reasons. Yet numerous Arab specialists and even language academies (Cairo and Damascus) have advocated linguistic reform. This reform would reinforce the use of the Arabic language in its contemporary form after a simplification process that would make it easier to learn, easier to understand, and easier to produce. Calls for the simplification of the grammar of *fusha* and the modernization and reactualization of its lexicon have been repeatedly made at various important Arab meetings over the past 40 years. These reforms have not been implemented yet because of the inherent complexities of the linguistic task and the sensitive sociolinguistic situation. Proponents of the simplification of *fusha*, the major factor in access to lifelong learning and socioeconomic development, are still urgently looking for research that will help in the formulation of the needed implementation steps. Since simplifying Arabic involves a new way of thinking about the language, all Arabs need to be attitudinally committed to a simplification of the language standards used in formal and non-formal education and greater attention needs to be devoted to the language standards that will assure greater success and improve the quality of education. These new standards should borrow their vitality from the vernacular varieties, and would gradually bridge the gap between the language of literacy and education and the language of the home. It is only through this type of reform that the Arab region can make the acquisition of the language of first literacy easier for its diverse learners. ■

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State Support for Minority Language Literacies in China

In every multilingual society, pressures to acquire the national language(s) and to assimilate to the majority culture are important constraints on the demand for minority language schooling and literacy. In China, the demand for instruction in the majority language (*putonghua*) is intensified by the time and effort required to acquire literacy in Chinese characters (*Hanzi*). Even among China's frontier minorities, living in communities with very limited access to Han language and literacy, learning to read and write a Chinese minority language is often seen as a detour away from literacy in Han Chinese. Yet there are many compelling reasons for China to build and promote a system of education that incorporates minority languages and literacies.

Several of China's 55 officially recognized national minorities have more than one spoken language. Estimates of the number of mother tongues spoken in the PRC range from 80 to more than 100. Forty-seven minority languages in China have their own writing systems and more than 30 minority languages are currently used in China's elementary school system.

The Chinese government's support for mother tongue literacy among China's ethnolinguistic minorities is partly a matter of practical necessity and partly a matter of political will. The practical need for mother tongue schooling and literacy is related to the need for local development in rural and remote monolingual minority communities. In such communities, acquiring Han Chinese literacy in school may primarily act as a gateway out of the community for a small number of high-achieving youth. Political support for minority language literacy is reflected in the Chinese constitution's guarantee of equal treatment of Han Chinese and Chinese minority languages.

The future of China's official support for minority language literacies is uncertain. Although Han Chinese and minority languages are equal by law, there is widespread official and popular recognition of the fact of linguistic inequality. In the case of some newly created writing systems, such as that being promoted for the Zhuang language, available literature is so limited and marginal as to be virtually useless. Even among better established traditional writing systems, such as Tibetan, Uygur, or Mongolian, literacy may not be widespread among the population or may be restricted to limited functional domains (such as religion or folklore).

The Chinese government's support for minority language literacies is also related to the politics of identity. Languages (and especially literacies) are among the most fundamental markers of identity and difference. The majority Han population speaks a variety of distinct mother tongues, yet the Han people share a common writing system, written language, history, and cultural identity. In China, as in other multiethnic states, the "otherness" of minority languages, literacies, and cultures is an important support for the construction and maintenance of the majority identity. ■

Adapted from R. Stites, (in press), Writing cultural boundaries: National minority language policy, literacy planning, and bilingual education, in G. Postiglione (Ed.), *The education of national minorities in China* (New York: Garland, in press). See also D. Gladney, (1994), Representing nationality in China: Refiguring majority/minority identities, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 1, 92-123.

Mother Tongue Versus Second Language Literacy: Research From Morocco

Does learning to read in the “mother tongue” or first (native) language enhance children’s school achievement relative to that of children obliged to learn to read in a second language? More than 40 years ago, specialists at a UNESCO conference stated their unequivocal support for the use of mother tongue or vernacular education programs in a now-classic statement: “It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child to read is his mother-tongue”

Many language and education specialists seem to view this topic as resolved. Researchers have gathered a variety of evidence to support the theory that learning to read in one’s “mother tongue” or first language enhances a child’s achievement relative to that of children obliged to learn to read in a second language. Evidence collected primarily in Europe and America has been applied to support early mother tongue education programs in many developing countries. However, recent reviews, including the findings reported here, present a more complex picture.

A five-year longitudinal study of literacy acquisition among children from a rural town in Morocco was completed in 1987–8. Children in the sample came from two distinct linguistic communities (Moroccan Arabic and Berber), but lived in the same village, attended the same schools, and received literacy instruction in Arabic and subsequently French. Analyses showed that while there were significant differences in Arabic (first literacy) reading achievement between Berber- and Arabic-speaking groups in the first year of schooling, such differences virtually disappeared after five years of schooling. Quranic preschooling, also conducted in Arabic, was found to be an important mediating influence on achievement. Learning to read in French (second literacy) was unrelated to Berber or Arabic linguistic background, but highly related to reading achievement in Arabic.

Overall, this research adds support to the proposition that children in certain social and linguistic contexts need not be taught in their mother tongue in order to achieve the literacy norms of the majority language group. Further research on child and adult learning, in differing ethnolinguistic contexts, is required before we can make broad conclusions about “what’s best” in literacy programs. ■

This article is adapted from a chapter by D. A. Wagner that appeared in A. Durgunoglu & L. Verhoeven (Eds.), (1996), *Acquiring literacy in multilingual contexts: A cross-cultural comparison*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

UNESCO’s Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V) will take place in Hamburg, Germany, July 14-18, 1997. The International Literacy Institute has helped to organize two panels: “Literacy Research, Evaluation and Statistics” and “Literacy and Technology,” which will cover new ground in approaching the improvement of literacy work worldwide. If you plan to be in Hamburg, please visit these panels and the ILI exhibition booth.

Literacy Online and the International Literacy Explorer: Two New Electronic Tools for Literacy Specialists

The International Literacy Institute (ILI) is sponsoring two new electronic tools for literacy specialists—Literacy Online, a new website dedicated to providing useful information concerning literacy for researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners worldwide, and the *International Literacy Explorer*, a multimedia tool for examining world literacy solutions in CD-ROM format. Literacy Online, which can be reached at www.literacyonline.org, will be introduced in mid-July 1997. It takes advantage of the communications possibilities of the WWW to offer up-to-date information on literacy events, research, and practice around the world. The ILI site is co-sponsored with the National Center on Adult Literacy (NCAL) at the University of Pennsylvania and promises to be a useful tool to help find specific literacy material in the sea of information that now makes up the World Wide Web. The *International Literacy Explorer* (ILE) CD-ROM will provide information in a more portable format. Case studies in six topic areas will be included: Rethinking Literacy, Language and Culture, Gender and Development, Teaching and Learning, Quality and Innovation, and Educational Technology. The ILE will also include a statistics database as well as numerous ILI/NCAL reports, and in the coming years is expected to be available in a multilingual format. For more information, contact the ILI or visit our redesigned website (noted above).

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