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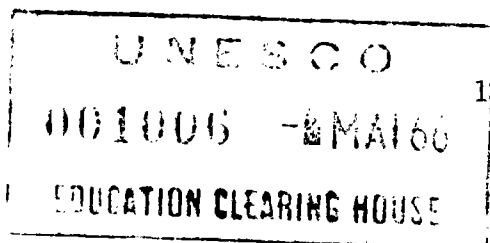
Meeting of Experts

on

THE USE OF THE MOTHER TONGUE
FOR LITERACY

STUDY ON THE USE OF THE MOTHER TONGUE FOR LITERACY AND
THE PREPARATION OF ALPHABETS FOR UNWRITTEN LANGUAGES

A Brief prepared by the Department of Adult Education, UNESCO PARIS.



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STUDY ON THE USE OF THE MOTHER TONGUE FOR LITERACY AND THE PREPARATION
OF ALPHABETS FOR UNWRITTEN LANGUAGES

SUMMARY OF ELEMENTS

1. This paper outlines some important linguistic elements to be covered in the study; obviously there are other problems but the following paragraphs provide a broad framework of questions about which many countries embarking on literacy programmes request information.

2. This study is not concerned with language policies, which are matters solely for governments concerned; it is concerned only with linguistic problems which may arise in developing literacy programmes to meet those policies.

3. Adult literacy programmes involve the question of the language to be used. It has been argued both on pedagogic and cultural grounds that literacy should be begun in the mother tongue; it has also been maintained that in some situations there are strong arguments against this. Some workers maintain that much of the argument is based on instinct and opinion rather than on a scientific examination of the question.

4. Many different language situations exist. For example, in Melanesia several hundred mutually incomprehensible languages are spoken by only about 2 million people; these languages are for the most part unrelated to each other and none holds promise as a lingua franca. On the other hand, in some small islands, e.g. Niue, only one language is spoken but the total population is only a few thousands. These examples are extremes.

5. In Africa and Asia many languages may be spoken within the boundaries of single national states; some are spoken by very large numbers of people running into millions; others are spoken by much smaller numbers - sometimes only numbering a few thousands. In some places groups of smaller languages are sometimes sufficiently closely related to permit possibilities of one of the larger languages being designated as an official language and serving as a lingua franca, or for other kinds of lingua franca to be attempted. Other languages spoken by only very small numbers may remain a problem.

6. In all the above situations, there may also be need for one of the world languages, but the reasons for the need vary. The need for a world language is multilingual Melanesia, for example, is to serve as a lingua franca but in some monolingual areas the need stems from the fact that the small population numbers permit communication only within a very narrow area. In some cases there might be a need for a whole population to be conversant with a world language for purposes of lingua franca; whereas in others the need may exist mainly for those whose duties bring them into constant contact with affairs in which a world language is needed; other reasons for concentrating on a world language may be matters of national policy.

7. Thus questions involving choice of language for literacy are exceedingly complicated, and even economic questions concerning the numbers of people speaking a language before it can be considered "viable" take on relative rather than absolute aspects. It is perfectly possible to develop literature in a monolingual country having a population of only a few thousands because there is only one language competing for the State's resources; but what are we to say of situations where very numerous languages are spoken by small groups within the boundaries of a single state? The competition for limited national resources may be overwhelming.

8. In some countries, it may well be that the policy about language teaching in schools, where a learning period of several years is available, may differ from that for adult literacy programmes where the learning period needs to be condensed into a very much shorter period.

9. The study to be undertaken includes two different aspects which become related in a multilingual situation. One aspect, i.e. preparation of alphabets for unwritten languages could be regarded as a largely scientific problem. The other aspect, concerning the choice of language to be used (mother tongue or other) for literacy programmes involves political, economic, and pedagogical questions as well as purely linguistic ones; we are concerned in this study with the linguistic aspect.

10. As regards the preparation of alphabets, there may be little theoretical difficulty in this aspect (though often severe practical problems). Trained linguists have well evolved scientific foundations and modern techniques for such work. Nevertheless, many languages have still to be studied fully and are without satisfactory written forms, and in other cases there may be a need to improve or standardize existing alphabets or orthographies. But the question arises "How far should the most advanced scientific principles for preparing a new alphabet for a hitherto unwritten language be modified (simplified) to meet the learning needs of new literates?"

11. In a multilingual situation where the use of the mother tongue may be preparatory to transition to a wider tongue many special problems arise, some of which are as follows:

- (a) How far should purely scientific principles for the preparation of new alphabets be modified to meet the situation when the wider language already has a well established (though not scientifically accurate) orthography and a developed literature? Such questions may be further complicated according to whether or not the phonemes of the wider language are closely related to those of the mother tongue.

(b) When the wider tongue to be used has already been determined, are there, in consequence, any special principles or methods which could be usefully incorporated into the teaching of literacy to adults in the mother tongue?

(c) The "wider" tongue in question may be a local language having structural and phonemic relationships to the mother tongue; or it may be a language (e.g. one of the world languages) having no such relationships. Does this affect approaches and principles for basic literacy programmes?

12. Another area of enquiry may be this: In some countries illiterate adults already have a good spoken knowledge of a wider language in which literature already exists, and there is little or no existing literature in their mother tongue; in such circumstances how strong is the case for starting literacy in the mother tongue. It may be better to start it in the tongue already spoken.

13. The study should be an essentially practical one, based on actual problems, difficulties, and practices existing in the countries studied, having for its aim a contribution to the solution of problems arising when programmes to eradicate adult illiteracy are undertaken. It is concerned primarily with the linguistic aspects of the problem.

14. The practical application of the findings of the study will form the subject of discussions at the Meeting of Experts which is proposed for mid-1964, and to which the report of this study will be submitted. Moreover, bearing in mind that the time period for this study is short, and the problem to be studied is complex and seldom amenable to easy solutions, it is expected that the study will indicate fields in need of further research which may be brought to the attention of appropriate institutions.