

## Key principles of literacy acquisition in Africa: SIL's perspective (with copious references)

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SIL Africa Area has nearly 50 years of organizational experience in literacy instruction, carried out in the context of grassroots-level development of Africa's minority and unwritten languages.

Out of that experience, we have identified these fundamental components of literacy:

- **Independent reading:** the ability to read any text for which one has the requisite background knowledge, including the language (Trudell and Klaas 2011).
- The ability to **understand and interact** with what is read (Aga Khan Foundation 2010; Braunger and Lewis 2006).
- The ability to produce **independent, original writing** using standard forms<sup>1</sup> (Malone 2004; Weber et al 2007).

These core components of literacy provide the conceptual frame for SIL's literacy materials and programs. We consider that reading and writing are equally crucial components of sustainable literacy, and that in fact an interdependent, complementary relationship exists between the acquisition reading and writing skills (Langer and Flihan 2000).

In the African language communities in which SIL works, language choice is also crucial to successful literacy acquisition. Indeed, this is true for all readers (Snowling and Hulme 2006), but it is only where the learner is not fluent in the language of instruction that the issue becomes clear, and the consequences of language choice are inescapable (García 2008). For that reason, the literacy materials and programs in which SIL is involved are centered on **teaching reading and writing in a language which the learner understands well**. Given that the languages in these situations are usually minority languages, this commitment to the use of the learner's own language has implications for many aspects of the process: materials preparation, teacher training, language development where no written tradition or body of written text exists in the language, and more.

In applying these principles to literacy and education programs in minority language communities across Africa, SIL has also established the fundamental importance of **attending to context** in ensuring successful reading acquisition. Essential contextual factors include:

### *Factors related to the language of instruction*

- Orthographic characteristics (Cahill and Karan 2008; Share 2008)
  - orthographic depth (Schroeder 2010; Ellis et al 2004)

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the languages in which SIL works do not have a written tradition, and some do not yet have a standardized written form. In these contexts, the notion of "standard written forms" would refer to the agreed-upon forms that have been determined for the language so far.

- o syllabic complexity (Ziegler and Goswami 2005)
- o morphological complexity (Trudell and Schroeder 2007)
- o grain size (Ziegler and Goswami 2005; Goswami 2005)
- o the script (Ellis et al 2004; Cook and Bassetti 2005)
- conventions on reading direction (Cook 2005)
- Word length (Davis 2004; Rayner 2009)
- Grammatical influences on word frequency (Rayner et al 2001)
- Tone orthography (Roberts 2009; Snider 2001; Bird 1999)

*Factors related to teaching and learning*

- Teacher competencies (Eritrean Ministry of Education 2005; Francis and Reyhner 2002)
- Teacher and learner expectations (Commeiras and Inyega 2007)
- Available classroom resources (Waters 1998)
- Teacher and learner fluency in the language of instruction (Hays 2009; Gay 2000)

*Factors related to the wider environment*

- Physical environment, including the health and nutrition of both teachers and learners (Abadzi 2006; Schroeder 2004)
- The print environment (Shohamy and Gorter 2009)
- National curriculum expectations (both explicit and implicit) (Schroeder 2003)
- Language policy and language attitudes (Muthwii 2007; Olayemi 1990)
- Local and national expectations (both explicit and implicit) regarding the purpose of formal education (Trudell 2007; Desmond and Elfert 2008)

All of these contextual factors have significant influence on the outcomes of literacy programs in the African communities where SIL works.

A range of **reading and writing skills and strategies**, essential for being able to read and write independently and with comprehension, are incorporated into the materials and programs with which SIL is associated in Africa. These include:

- Oral language skills, including vocabulary development (Bardovi-Harlig and Comajaoan 2008)
- Phonemic awareness (Schroeder 2007)
- Letter/sound recognition (phonics) (Abadzi 2006)
- Decoding (Coltheart 2005; Beck and Juel 1992)
- Directionality of text (Cook 2005)
- Comprehension strategies, including high-level comprehension strategies (Sadoski 2004; Baker 2001; Almasi and Hart 2011))
- Fluency, both oral and silent, for enhanced access to meaning (Samuels and Farstrup 2006; Rasinski 2003; Pikulski and Chard 2005)
- Writing, with both accurate production of standard forms and creative intent (Murphy and Venicio 2009; Treiman and Kessler 2005)

We consider that specific attention to these skills and strategies is essential for successful reading acquisition.

The pedagogical methods which SIL uses and endorses for African language literacy, then, take all of this into account. They are also, necessarily, contextually shaped. Context determines to a great extent such features as:

- The instructional strategies that are modeled and taught
- The balance between decoding and comprehension instruction
- The means of capturing learner motivation
- Culturally appropriate content
- The authors of the content
- The physical appearance of the materials and teaching aids
- The type and number of illustrations

SIL does not promote the use of one particular instructional template or method, as long as the key features of literacy – independent reading and writing, reading with understanding, and use of a language in which the learner is highly fluent – are clearly in focus.

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