

Developing your primer

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The Instructional Materials Resource has been developed with the Solomon Islands village context in mind. The format ensures that attention is given to the various roles of the reader-writer and includes learning the sounds of the language, learning to decode and encode texts, learning to think about texts and use texts in ways that are helpful for the learner. There needs to be a balance of these different roles throughout the lessons and also a variety of relevant texts need to be included. The lessons are also structured so that there is a good flow from one activity to another.

As you develop a primer for your language using the formats that have been provided keep in mind that you need to maintain the balance of work on the different literacy roles and that the flow of the lesson is kept in the materials you develop.

Before you can build on the resources that are provided, there are some tasks you need to do that are particular to your language. They are:

1. Develop lists about the sounds of your language
2. Do frequency counts on 3-5 different kinds of texts from your language. If you don't have texts in your language you and your friends will need to write some.
3. From your frequency count divide the sounds of your language into 5 groups – from the most frequent sounds to the least frequent sounds.
4. Develop a list of syllables that occur in your language
5. Develop a list of words that can be illustrated
6. Choose a key word for each sound of your language.
7. Survey some of the people in your village and develop a list of topics that they would like to read about.

When you have done these things, you will be ready to begin working on your own primer materials. The following pages help you to do the preparatory work mentioned in the above list.

The Sounds of your language

Each language has its own sound system and its own way of putting sounds together to make words. Some languages have small alphabets, other have large ones. What are the sounds in your alphabet?

Digraphs. Do you have any digraphs in your language? Digraphs are two or more symbols that represent one sound. For example in English we have digraphs like:

‘th’ in this and that

‘ng’ in sing, rang

‘oo’ in choose

‘kn’ in knee, knew, knit

‘sh’ in sheep, shield

‘ph’ in photo, saxophone, pharynx

These are examples of where there is more than one letter representing a sound. If you have some digraphs, add them to your list above of the sounds in your alphabet. Some languages use digraphs like mb, nd or nt for sounds like b, d, and t which are made by holding the lips closed, or the tongue against the roof of the mouth, for a short time.

Diacritics. Some languages put marks above or below some of their letters. These can indicate when sounds are made with nose air (nasalisation), or in different ways such as the tongue tip being curled upwards when the sound is made (retroflexed sounds). Students need to be taught all sounds, letter combinations and extra marks that they will encounter when learning to read in their language. So it is important to have a list of all the letters that need to be taught.

We must be careful to always treat digraphs as a whole. They should never be split up. For example the gw sound should not be separated to teach g or w but always kept as a unit. Different words would be used to teach the g and the w. For example, in Golin (PNG), *gwi* ‘wind’ could be used to teach the gw sound. They would use a different word like *gal* ‘bilum’ to teach ‘g’ and a different word to teach ‘w’. It would be wrong to use ‘gw’ to teach either ‘g’ or ‘w’ as it is really an example of a ‘gw’ word, which starts with a different sound altogether.

Frequency counts

A frequency count (or sound count) determines how often each sound occurs in written language. It is used as a guide to help decide which sounds should be taught first in primers and reading lessons.

The frequency count is only a guide. It should never be used to set a rigid order of introducing sounds in primer lessons. It does not have to be followed slavishly and can be changed to suit other needs. It is good, however, to teach the most common letters first in early reading lessons. More words can be made using these letters, and so stories can be read more easily.

Following is an example of how to do a frequency count using a sample story from Tok Pisin (PNG). It is taken from page 2 of the booklet, *The Sounds of Your Language*, put out by the Department of Education (PNG, 1991).

Pasin bilong wokim nupela gaden na banis

Sapos papa bilong mi i laik wokim nupela gaden, pastaim em i katim kunai na pitpit na bus samting. Olgeta samting i drai pastaim, orait em i kukim.

Em i save tumas long pasin bilong ol pik. Olsem na em i kisim diwai i gat strong. Em i brukim na sapim bilong wokim banis pik. Em i pasim banis long rop. Olsem na ol diwai i paspas na pik i no inap brukim.

Banis i pinis, orait papa bilong mi em i tokim sampela man, na ol i go kamautim as bilong pitpit na rausim rop bilong diwai. Ol i wok pinis, na papa bilong mi em i mumuim sampela kaikai bilong ol, na ol i go kaikai.

Long narapela taim em i singautim sampela man i go brukim graun long stik bilong ol. Ol i putim sampela kunai na lip bilong diwai i go daunbilo. Ol i karamapim na hipim graun antap na ol i planim kaukau. Long sampela hap ol meri tasol i save hipim graun na planim kaukau.

Arere long gaden mipela i save planim sampela pitpit na sampela kon na sampela aibika na kumu na bin. Banana tu, sampela taim. Tasol banana em i save planim klostu long haus. Mi liklik yet na mi wantaim papa bilong mi, mitupela i save mekim wok olsem.

To do a sound count for this Tok Pisin story, go through the story word by word. Each time you come to a new sound, write the sound in the first column (under Sound) in the following chart and put one mark in the second column (Number of times in story). Then, every time you see that sound again, put another mark in the second column next to that sound. After you have gone through the entire story, count up the number of marks for each sound and put the total for each sound in the last column (Total). This chart will then show the order of sounds as they occurred in the sample story, the number of times the sound occurred, and thus which were the most frequent sounds in the story.

After counting the sounds in the two words *Sapos papa*, the sound count chart would look like this:

| letter | frequency | total |
|--------|-----------|-------|
| s | 11 | |
| a | 111 | |
| p | 111 | |
| o | 1 | |

When a sound has four marks against it like this IIII, the fifth mark is used to ‘tie the bundle’ like this HHH. Continue marking the chart and tie the sticks in bundles of five. At the end of the Tok Pisin text the sound count chart would look like this:

| Sounds | Number of times in story | Total |
|--------|--|-------|
| s | HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH | 40 |
| a | HHH III | 113 |
| p | HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH I | 46 |
| o | HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH | 40 |
| ng | HHH HHH HHH III | 17 |
| b | HHH HHH HHH IIII | 19 |
| i | HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH I | 51 |
| l | HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH II | 48 |
| n | HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH | 45 |
| g | HHH IIII | 9 |
| m | HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH III | 57 |
| k | HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH IIII | 29 |
| r | HHH HHH HHH | 15 |
| v | HHH | 5 |
| w | HHH III | 7 |
| u | HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH | 25 |
| e | HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH | 35 |
| d | HHH II | 7 |
| t | HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH II | 27 |
| y | I | 1 |
| h | IIII | 4 |

Now the sounds can be listed in order of their frequency.

| | |
|---|-----|
| a | 113 |
| m | 57 |
| i | 51 |
| l | 48 |
| p | 46 |
| n | 45 |
| o | 40 |
| s | 40 |

| | |
|----|----|
| e | 35 |
| k | 29 |
| t | 27 |
| u | 25 |
| b | 19 |
| ng | 17 |
| r | 15 |
| g | 9 |

| | |
|---|---|
| d | 7 |
| w | 7 |
| v | 5 |
| h | 4 |
| y | 1 |
| j | 0 |
| f | 0 |
| | |

This chart shows that the sounds *j* and *f* were not in the sample story. It is, therefore, important to do sound counts on several different stories in order to get a good sound count. Also, some letters may be more frequent in this story than in other stories. For these reasons, it is good to do sound counts for 3–5 different stories to get a more accurate count and chart your results as follows:

| Sounds | Text 1 Papa | Text 2 fishing | Text 3 a letter to my friend | Text 4 gardens | Text 5 how to... | Total |
|--------|----------------|-------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|-------|
| a | | | | | | |
| m | | | | | | |
| i | | | | | | |
| l | | | | | | |

etc....

When you have totaled your counts from 3-5 texts list the sounds in order of their frequency. Group the sounds into five groups from the most frequent to the least frequent.

1. most frequent:
2. next frequent:
3. next:
4. next:
5. least frequent:



Remember, the sound frequencies are just a guide for designing primers.

Sometimes it is more appropriate to teach a sound that is key to the theme of the text that you are using. And sometimes there are special words that are needed to make sentences complete or help groups of sentences flow better. (These words are sometimes called functors.) So it might be important to teach the sounds in these words earlier than your frequency count suggests. Once you have done your frequency count ask yourself or your group – are there special words that need to have their sounds taught early because they carry an important function in our language. Make a list of these.

The sound counts I did in Takia resulted in the following list:

1. most frequent: a, i, o, u.
2. next frequent: b, g, d, l, n, t
3. next: ng, y, e
4. next: f, k, m
5. least frequent: s, p, r, w

I used this list as a guide when doing primers but I also changed the order around a little to fit in with the stories I was using in the lessons and the design of the primer. For example, I introduced the letter *i* before the letter *a* because the key word in the story for the lesson was *ilalang*, which means 'light'. And I introduced *y* in the third lesson instead of the twelfth because the word *you* 'water' was an important word in that part of the story. The sound counts are only a guide.

Yasuko Nagai did sound counts on all the stories that were written for use in the Maiwala prep school. Then she ordered the use of the stories according to the sound counts. This meant that the story matched well with the sound being taught in each lesson.

What groups would you put your letters in?

Which are the most frequent? Which the next?

1. most frequent: _____
2. next frequent: _____
3. next: _____
4. next: _____
5. least frequent: _____

So the letters in group 1 and 2 will be letters you need to teach first, and teach the other sounds after them, approximately in this order but you can change them around a little to suit the texts you are using in each lesson.

Do a sound count for a text in your language

| Sounds | Number of times in story | Total |
|--------|--------------------------|-------|
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Chart the sound counts for 3-5 texts in your language

| Sounds | Text 1 | Text 2 | Text 3 | Text 4 | Text 5 | Total |
|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
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Syllable patterns

(This section on syllables has been adapted from the booklet, *The Sounds in Your Language, produced in PNG.*)

Each language has its own rules for the way that sounds can be put together into words. Alphabets are made up of vowels, such as *a, e, i, o, u* and consonants such as *t, s, m, l, y*. Vowels and consonants combine together to make syllables.

What is a syllable? A syllable is a vowel sound together with the consonants which closely surround that vowel. Think of the consonants in the syllable as belonging to that particular vowel rather than to some other vowel. The consonants which usually belong to a vowel are the ones which come before the vowel. In some languages it may also include consonants following the vowel. A syllable does not have meaning, it is just a combination of sounds. Combinations of syllables make words and words carry meaning.

People seem to know how to divide words into syllables, especially when they speak very slowly. For example, if a person says the English word *motor* very slowly, it is divided into the two syllables *mo* and *tor*. The Tok Pisin (PNG) word *mama* has two syllables *ma* and *ma* and the Hiri Motu word *masini* has three syllables *ma, si, and ni*.

Syllables are of different types depending on the patterns of vowels and consonants. The patterns are different in different languages. In some languages, a syllable may have two vowels in it rather than one because the pair of vowels act like a single vowel. For example, in the Tok Pisin word *kaukau* the **au** acts like a single vowel so we get **kau kau**. Some other Tok Pisin words with two vowels in the syllable are **kaikai** and **boi**.

Sometimes two vowels next to each other are from two different syllables. The Tok Pisin word *stia* is like that. It has the syllables *sti* and *a*.

In Tok Pisin, sometimes two consonants occur together in the same syllable such as **stap, skin, spet, snek, and swit**.

Occasionally, three consonants occur together in the same syllable, for example **stret**.

It is important to know the common combinations of sounds in a language. In Tok Pisin, for example, *s* combines with a lot of other consonants in a syllable but *f* rarely does. The common combinations for a language should be taught in the primers so students can practice reading them.

Look at your texts and list the different syllable types you can find.
List any restrictions about what sounds occur in what syllable types.

Words that can be easily illustrated

Another useful tool for primer making is a list of words that can be easily illustrated. All beginning primers depend heavily on using picture clues, especially in the early stages when a student is just beginning to get meaning from print. Many primers use a picture and a word to teach each new sound. Words that can be illustrated are usually a noun, that is, a person, place, or thing. It is difficult to illustrate a verb (an action) or a feeling.

Whenever I design primers, I make a list of words that can be easily illustrated. The following list is part of my Takia list of words that can be illustrated.

s *sasam* 'shark', *sabai* 'prawn', *sis* 'grass hopper', *suwir* 'parrot', *sisei* 'clam shell'
t *tamol* 'man', *tatu* 'bone'
u *ul* 'breadfruit', *urit* 'octopus', *ut* 'weeds', *ut* 'lice'
w *wos* 'aibika', *walu* 'pumpkin', *woi* 'mango', *wagudum* 'bush berry'

It is also important that the pictures prompt the response that you desire from the students. For example, at Ramingining, Australia, a certain picture of a kangaroo never received the response of *garrtjambal*, the general word for female kangaroo. People would try and work out the specific type of kangaroo by the particular features which were obvious in the picture. Their responses would not necessarily start with *g* and often caused great discussions about what type of kangaroo it was. This happened because the artist did not draw an accurate picture of what the real animal looked like. This distracted the people and stopped them from associating the picture with the letter *g*.

Another example comes from Boroloola, Australia, where Judy Knowles had to redraw her primer pictures of a girl many times as she would get a variety of responses from "baby," "young child," "child of marriageable age," to "young woman" depending on her drawing.

All illustrations should be checked with the village people. Check that they can recognize them and that their initial response to them is the word wanted in the lesson. This is particularly important for the pictures that are used in the early primer lessons.

Choosing key words

Many primers use a picture and a word to teach each new sound or syllable. These Key words must be chosen carefully.

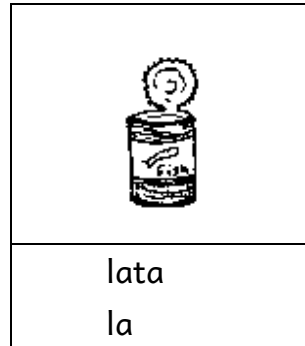
- They should be chosen from words that can be illustrated.
- They should contain the letter or syllable being taught in the initial position in the word, if at all possible.
- They should be words that have a simple syllable structure. (If CV syllables are common they are usually best for key words.)

- If possible they should be an important word or theme word in the story material that is the focus of the lesson.

Be careful not to place an improper emphasis on a key word. Use it to

demonstrate that “this is the part of *kesu* that says *ke* or *k*” as the case may be and move on.

Some years ago, the following key words and pictures were used in Mexico to teach *sa* and *la*.



Unfortunately what the pupils learned was that the syllable and word were one and the same, so that when they attempted to read the unfamiliar word *sala* ‘lounge room’ they came out with a meaningless word *sapo-lata*.

There can be a danger in the use of a key word if the teacher continually refers back to it and too strongly equates a single syllable with the key word used to teach it. (Gudschinsky 1973:36)

Fill this chart out for your language:

| Sounds | Words that start with the sound and can be illustrated |
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Circle one or two for each sound that would make a good key word.

Primers can be developed using different kinds of texts. It is good to develop texts related to the interests and needs of the students. Discuss possible topics with the people in your village and list some ideas for themes here: