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**PRACTICAL DECISIONS IN  
INSTRUCTIONAL RADIO INNOVATION**

by

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## PRACTICAL DECISIONS IN INSTRUCTIONAL RADIO INNOVATION

### INTRODUCTION

Cost-effective innovation in primary education may determine whether future primary school age children receive an adequate education or not. Conventional methods of classroom teaching and teacher preparation are expensive. For countries in which there is a burgeoning school population but dwindling educational resources, it is necessary to rethink traditional methods of educating children. One approach--using radio as a major medium to teach English--is currently under study at the Kenya Institute of Education.

The Radio Language Arts Project is a five-year research and development project funded by the the Office of Education, Bureau for Science and Technology, of the United States Agency for International Development. The project is designed to develop, implement, and test the effectiveness of an instructional system which uses radio to teach English as a second language at the primary-school level. Both qualitative and cost aspects of effectiveness will be tested in this pilot project. The end product will be a radio-based English language program for standards 1 through 3 complete with taped lessons (approximately 195 lessons of 30 minutes each for each school year, appropriate tests, teacher orientation materials, and classroom observation and data-gathering procedures). Although the project has been designed for specific application to Kenya, it is expected that the model which emerges can be replicated, with modification, in other educational systems in the developing world.

The project, which began school broadcasts in January 1982, has already raised a number of important issues about the development process. Using radio as the major instructional medium has forced the project team members to

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look carefully at the radio medium, language teaching pedagogy, and the specific educational situation in Kenya in order to make the necessary decisions that will assure success in Kenya. Each of the following areas that have influenced practical decisions will be discussed briefly: the educational environment, the radio medium, the existing infrastructure of educational broadcasting, the curriculum, and the need to evaluate the project.

### **RADIO AS A MEDIUM**

Radio has some clear cost and pedagogic advantages as a teaching medium. It is perhaps not the ideal medium for language teaching. As a one-way medium it lacks the potential for interaction between speaker and hearer characteristic of real communication, the stimulus and reinforcement that conversation can bring to the language classroom.

One can view the constraints as a challenge to reexamine the nature of language learning and make use of the opportunities radio does offer. There are some interesting parallel features between radio and good language teaching which have heavily influenced practical decisions about language teaching on the radio.

First, radio is solely an aural medium. Effective language learning seems to be grounded in effective comprehension of the aural language environment. This certainly is the case with children, who gradually build up an intuition about their language through the relatively unconscious analysis of what they hear during the first few years of life. It also seems the case with older second language learners, who most often "study" the language consciously, that is they learn in a structured language environment in which the new language is controlled or given to the learners in small doses. Experience indicates

that language learning occurs for most people more rapidly when there is a heavy aural component to instruction and when some degree of aural mastery occurs before intensive reading is attempted. Radio can provide an aural experience of more diversity and quality than the typical classroom teacher. The ineffective language classroom is filled with teacher talk, dead air, and fumbling attempts at speech by learners who are not ready for speech. The carefully timed and structured radio broadcast is filled with language in the form of dialogue, songs, questions, riddles, games, commands, and other language experience.

Second, the good language class is active. The often unplanned classroom activities such as teacher-student question and answer sessions are not mentally engaging nor realistic communication. Although radio lacks the visual dimension, it can effectively activate the learners cognitively and sensuously. Since it is not very realistic for the listener to talk back to the radio on an individual basis, more imaginative ways of stimulating radio-class interaction and student-student interaction must be initiated by the radio. These can include physical responses to language cues in addition to more conventional but carefully structured activities. For the very young learner, it is necessary to include frequent changes of pace and activity. The carefully designed radio lessons, with the sound resources available to the broadcaster, can supply the necessary variety.

Additionally, listening to the radio requires an active imagination. It requires concentration on the language message to a greater extent than a visual medium such as television or face to face communication. Used effectively, this encourages the listener to imagine himself a participant in the language activities rather than an onlooker. This ability to take a role in language exchanges can lead to greater language development.

Finally, the absence of visual stimuli has another advantage in that radio speakers, identified only with the voice and first names, are less culturally and socially specific and can serve for a larger cross-section of a multicultural and multilingual environment. This does not mean that the radio characters should be bloodless, or they will have no appeal to the listener, but the visual signals of social class, regional dress, age, and so on are obscured and, therefore, have wider appeal on the radio. Pupils are more likely to identify with the characters and take a participatory role in exercises.

Almost daily, practical decisions are being made about language teaching because of the nature of radio as a medium. In the instances mentioned above, these decisions have probably improved instruction.

#### **EDUCATIONAL BROADCASTING IN KENYA**

The Radio Language Arts Project is not a self-contained project that just happens to be in Kenya. Although the project is intended to develop an instructional model that could be used in other countries with educational practices similar to Kenya's, the specific content of the lessons and the evaluation of the project are designed for the needs of Kenya's primary education system. It is but one project within an education system that is open to innovation through its curriculum design and evaluation institution, the Kenya Institute of Education.

An instructional program can only serve as a model if it is demonstrated effective in a specific situation. Educational development can make sense only when that development is rooted in a specific context and is carried out in relation to specific needs identified for the intended audience.

Implementation of a specific research design into an existing

infrastructure requires modification in order to make the best use of that structure. In the project, some modification of the original research design was necessary in order to fit into the existing educational broadcasting infrastructure, but more importantly, the infrastructure accommodated the project by adaptation as well. This occurred in the following areas.

First, early primary standards do not normally receive much educational radio. A decision to use more radio for these standards represents the willingness to change the focus and perhaps the philosophy of radio instruction.

Second, implementing the project in a realistic broadcast mode, rather than cassette recordings for instance, required including 30 minutes of English language radio instruction in the schools broadcast schedule. This was a significant modification since the schedule was already full and other broadcasts had to make way.

Third, using radio as a medium, even in a pilot project, challenged conventional thinking about educational radio. Questions about further use of the radio in this way are only beginning to be asked. These questions related to the curriculum content that might be appropriate for greater use of the radio but also to the different kinds of writing and production required. Answers to the questions by Kenyan educators are largely awaiting the results of this project. At present, educational broadcasting in Kenya, as it does in most places, serves in a subsidiary role to the regular textbook-oriented, teacher-dominated classroom. The Radio Language Arts Project offers an alternative which may not only be effective pedagogically but may also be more cost effective. If the project is successful in teaching language by radio, other areas in the curriculum suggest themselves as suitable for radio lessons also. The project could have a profound effect on primary education in Kenya.

## **THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT**

Addressing the particular psychological and communicative needs of learners has become commonplace in modern language programs. Teachers can provide ample anecdotal evidence that materials developed for learners in a wealthy country are meaningless in a poor country. Adults cannot tolerate materials written for children. Rural learners cannot identify with the life style, jobs, or possessions of urban characters. Medical students are impatient learning vocabulary more appropriate to the study of English literature. One of the most overriding considerations in the development of effective language teaching methods and materials is, therefore, the target learners.

Whatever one's idealization of what it means to learn a foreign or second language, there are many practical decisions that have to be made in developing a radio-based curriculum for a specific learning audience. Working in a country in which education is centralized and uniform throughout the country, however, requires instructing the widest possible audience. Resources are not available to develop special programs to meet the requirements of each educational group. Several factors in the educational context in Kenya affected decisions about the content and activities of the lessons irrespective of the radio medium. Most of these would have been important considerations in developing a conventional, textbook curriculum for teaching English in Kenya, but the influence of the radio medium forced the writers to think more clearly about the way in which the language was being conveyed and practiced.

One such factor was the age of the students. Pupils begin the study of English in the first year of primary school in Kenya. The purpose of language study is not to shop at the market, travel, conduct business, read newspapers

and magazines or other adult activities. Rather, it is to acquire enough language skill to function in an academic setting. In Kenya this means using English as the medium of instruction by the fourth year of primary school. The children's purpose for English study has few practical or immediate rewards in the non-school world. Their major motivation for learning English is similar to the motivation for learning any other subject: the desire to please family and teacher and the thrill that most young children experience in learning during the early school years.

A second factor was the multicultural and multilingual character of the nation. Although most primary children have limited awareness of people and regions other than their immediate group or community, the educational authorities must help develop and foster a sense of nationhood among the diverse groups that make up the Kenyan state. Experiences, aspirations, and aesthetic and ethical values held in common by the various peoples form the content around which language activities are planned. Practically, this means rejecting content that is specifically related to only one group and selecting for early stages at least the elements with which all Kenyan children are familiar.

#### **CURRICULUM**

Radio-based instruction is seen as a way of augmenting an existing educational system, filling in some gaps. In the formal educational system, it is the recognition that educational resources may not be adequate to carry out conventional education for all the population that the nation wishes to serve. There may not be enough money to expand the system at the rate necessary to provide classrooms, trained teachers, and textbooks for all pupils.

In the case of Kenya, the mechanism for curriculum development and evaluation is one of long standing. School curricula have undergone a number of revisions in the direction of making them more relevant to modern Kenya. Radio-based instruction must then work within the constraints of this preestablished curriculum, a curriculum which has evolved over many years of discussions, trial, and revision.

Radio lessons do, however, call into question some of our basic assumptions about the linguistic content for primary pupils and require decisions about what to teach. Looking at language from a different perspective--through radio--reveals some of the inappropriateness of what we often teach in the conventional classroom. Two examples will illustrate many such instances from a thorough curriculum analysis.

One discovers some of the artificiality of the textbook dialogues when trying to adapt them to radio. For example, a person standing next to and pointing at the door and asking the question, "Is this a door or a window?" looks all right on the printed page. When one speaks such a question and its appropriate answer, however, we realize the unreality of such an exchange. It merely tests the hearer's knowledge of the label for the object being pointed at. Many such sentences lacking communicative value can be found in language teaching materials. This curriculum analysis, stemming from the need to develop better radio lessons, can result in better linguistic examples and exercises where genuine communication is exemplified.

Second, most language curricula are too extensive for the period of time allotted to teaching them. Yet teachers fear going too fast; they do not want to let learners go on to new materials until they have mastered the old material. The nature of radio programming is such that once the lessons are planned, written, and produced the pace is set. The materials themselves must

accommodate the slower learners by building in redundancy and revision, but the overall scope of the curriculum and the pace are controlled throughout the year. This does not change the curriculum content, but it may have an effect on the attention that each item in the curriculum receives. Although the radio curriculum cannot make easy adjustment for individual differences in students, it can give a fairer proportion of time to each item.

There are countless examples where choices have to be made in turning a conventional textbook curriculum into a radio curriculum. One cannot simply record the textbook and have effective radio.

#### **EVALUATION**

Perhaps the severest constraint to creative writers and radio producers is the fact that the radio lessons must be evaluated in some quantifiable manner by comparing them with conventional lessons. If one is to accomplish this comparison of achievement by acceptable standards of measurement, there must be common elements in both sets of lessons delivered to comparable pupils. There is no doubt that keeping in mind what can be compared, measured, and described restricts both the content and the activities that might otherwise be used in radio lessons. If we are to say with any authority that, given these objectives for studying English in Kenya, one group of students did better than another, we must have documented evidence. This is not an uncommon feature of educational experiments, but for language specialists and radio writers and producers it is a bothersome restraint on their creative imaginations. The evaluation scheme necessitated the following practical decisions.

First, we had to select a limited number of schools for testing. Broadcasts are limited to 21 pilot schools that represent more than 70% of the

population linguistically for the final evaluation procedures. Ten comparable schools are being used for daily observation of radio lessons for formative evaluation.

Second, language achievement testing at the first three primary standards is necessary. Such testing is not common in Kenyan schools, but school authorities have accommodated the project by allowing tests in the pilot schools. Good tests require carefully written objectives and instructional materials. This is quite different from many educational radio programs which emphasize "enrichment" activities, often described this way because what is taught cannot be measured.

Third, the radio production--sounds, music, acting, and so on--are in support of the instructional objectives. Broadcasters who are not familiar with instructional radio frequently want to give more attention than time or budget allow to making the production more colorful, artful, and lively. All these qualities are important in instructional radio as they are in radio for entertainment. Our decision was that they must serve the instructional goals, however, and aid in highlighting the testable elements of language lessons.

Fourth, the standard for comparison of the radio lessons is the conventional classroom in Kenya, in fact only those classrooms in the pilot schools. Therefore, it would be hazardous to generalize too broadly from this experience. Again, practical considerations required representative selection rather than broadcasting to the whole country.

## **CONCLUSION**

The need to make practical decisions or compromises--even total surrender in some cases--is a very positive part of the development process in radio instruction. Testing some of our assumptions about teaching languages to

children will be one of the major benefits of the Radio Language Arts Project.

The interaction and dynamics between the medium, the linguistic content, and the intended audience challenge--from each perspective--the abstract, theoretical position from which we approached the project. For example, our theoretical position on the nature of language and language teaching is being modified in a number of ways on practical consideration of radio's limits as a medium and rural Kenyan children's experiences. Also, conventional uses of radio for instruction are being stretched by trying to meet the demands of language teaching to very young children. Although too soon to tell, primary pupils may develop listening and verbal skills that challenge our assumptions about the teacher-pupil relationship in the learning process. Certainly not all issues raised by this project will be resolved satisfactorily, but even partial answers will move us closer to being able to provide, through more effective use of resources, better education for disadvantaged children.