

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Designing textbooks for an indigenous language: The case of Nambya

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Received: May 6, 2022 / Accepted: July 4, 2022 / Published Online: July 17, 2022
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Abstract

This article outlines the steps involved in writing secondary learners' textbooks from the vantage point of the authors and publishers. It unpacks the technicalities, merits, and demerits of team-authoring of materials in the context of revitalisation of indigenous languages within Zimbabwe's education system. The main focus is on the technical steps involved in the compilation and design of the textbook series. It evaluates the approaches that were used in the development of the Nambya textbooks in light of informing practice in subsequent future works by the same group or others.

Keywords textbook design, Nambya, team-authoring, language revitalisation

1. Introduction

The teaching of any subject within the school curriculum has been believed to depend largely on the availability of textbooks. This is concurred by Yazdanmehr and Shoghi (2014), who posit that "textbooks are believed to play a pivotal role in language classrooms and in many situations they serve even as the syllabus which yet adds to its value". Although it is not always the case that the textbook represents the syllabus, textbook writers and evaluators in many educational contexts are guided by the syllabus in their design of the final product. The textbook is a very important resource to both teachers and learners. The absence of textbooks makes learning a very difficult exercise. Teachers depend a lot on a wide range of materials for the sustenance of their teaching, and student's learning (Howard & Major, 2004), chief among these are the textbooks. The absence of textbooks means kills the drive for learning among the learners, who end up failing to take learning seriously (Ansary & Babaii, 2002). Because designers and evaluators closely follow the demands, aims and objectives of the syllabus, the textbook becomes an important resource for the teacher as it provides a framework that guides and regulates their programmes (Yazdanmehr & Shoghi, 2014).

2. Conceptual Issues

In this study, textbook development is approached from a broader setting of revival linguistics. The enterprise of textbook development is seen as one of the many efforts of mitigating the limitations that affect language revitalisation (Ghil'ad & Michael, 2011). As a theory revival linguistics draws insightful relative discernments from various localised endeavours to resuscitate dormant and largely indigenous languages in many contexts around the world. This is premised on the understanding that there exists a camaraderie of issues, limitations and methodologies that are intricate in language revitalisation, and perspicacious insights can be drawn from other contexts, notwithstanding the possibility of their divergent nature. Textbook development is a strategic move in resourcing indigenous language revitalisation as the textbook does not only become a classroom learning resource but a tangible artefact and testimony of the seriousness of efforts to revive the language. Viewed from this linguistic revival theoretical perspective, the language textbook provides linguists and other groups of professionals with a coherent and methodical approach to language revitalisation through teaching. The textbook is seen as a key enabler and strategic move in consolidating efforts to revive a language, particularly through the education system.

3. Background

While in other contexts, the need to develop new

textbooks often arises from the redundancy of the existing ones, in this study, the design of Nambya textbooks was necessitated by the absence of a single textbook, yet learners were expected to learn the language in schools. The context closely matched what Howard and Major (2004) refer to as tremendously penurious with very few resources at their disposal. In their study of why teachers choose to produce their own materials, they conclude that teachers are often driven by the commercial materials for teachers. In this study, the observation is that the need for textbooks mainly arose from the absence of a single textbook in the Nambya language. According to Bolitho (2010), this needs analysis of the kind of research often undertaken by publishers. However, in this study, the realisation is that needs analysis was carried out by activists and enthusiasts, most of whom are teachers and independent researchers who wanted to see the teaching of Nambya succeed. While Bolitho (2010) argues that such research often reveals gaps in the publishing market, the position in this paper is that a gap had been created by the gazetting of Nambya as an examinable subject in the curriculum without any books having been produced. A design template for a new set of readers was crafted. User profiling was done in relation to the lived experiences of teachers and learners. This was relatively easier due to the geospatial spread of the Nambya language within the district of Hwange, making it a more localised project. Therefore, developing a profile for the target users was made easier due to the local nature and smaller scale of the project. Understanding the context within which users operate was relatively easier (Bolitho, 2010).

While Loveridge et al. (1970) argue that “planning a book has two aspects: first, the problem of the subject matter, that is, determining what new knowledge has to be conveyed in the text; second, the problem of how it is best conveyed. In some cases, a writer has expert knowledge but is limited in the art of teaching it. In others, he knows how to teach but lacks knowledge of the subject; only sometimes does the writer know what to teach and how to present it to the pupils, hence the need to consult experts. In this regard, a materials design expert with experience in both language teaching and materials designs was engaged to co-ordinate the project while writers worked in teams.

Regarding the context, the most important variable was the geospatial spread of the Nambya language, which is predominantly within the administrative district of Hwange. This is a merit, as noted by Peresuh and Masuku (2002), who posit that one of the main features of Zimbabwe’s sociolinguistic landscape is that indigenous languages are rooted in the physical environment of the local community. The availability of language teachers who are natural speakers of Nambya was also noted as another merit to the initiative.” Moyo (2020) points out, “In language revitalisation programmes, teachers are the front-line and primary social actors of any language learning programme. Maseko

and Moyo (2013) argue that the dearth of proficient instructors is known for undesirably upsetting the Tonga language revitalisation programme, with teachers maintaining that they are not well-resourced for the teaching of the language and are in dire need of educational materials in the form of books.

4. Needs analysis

Regarding textbook development, Mukundan et al. (2022) note that textbook designers and assessors must consider several factors when making decisions regarding the materials they produce or opt to use in specific scenarios. These variables include the roles of teachers and learners, the intended roles of the materials as well as the syllabus goals (Richards and Rogers, 1987). Materials need to respond to the teachers’ and learners’ needs against the demands of the syllabus. Thus, in order to give a proper justification for these roles, the textbook designer and evaluators must be aware of the needs of the teachers and learners as well as their interests (Bell and Gower, 1998).

With language rights activism gaining currency in Zimbabwe and Nambya having been examined at Grade Seven, the government had given a greenlight to its teaching in secondary schools. For a start, the absence of textbooks meant that the teachers and learners needed one. Within this scope, three issues were considered; the real reasons for a textbook, the curriculum requirements as well as the protocol for official textbook evaluation and approval by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. It was not disputable that there was a real need for a language textbook. The questions hovered around the capacity to produce a standard textbook.

There was a need to develop learners’ textbooks that will assist them in learning the Nambya language and, most importantly, prepare themselves for the examinations. Guided by the curriculum and national examinations requirements, a template to be used in developing textbook series was prepared. As Loveridge et al. (1970) remind us that the textbook writer while planning his work, must keep in mind the function of textbooks as aids to teaching and particularly, he must have constantly before him the curriculum and syllabus requirements. Thus, the end product was mainly judged in relation to its ability to help teachers and learners prepare for the national examinations.

5. Enlisting and capacitating writers

For this project, a team of ten teachers was assembled to be capacitated as writers. These teachers worked with the volunteer linguist who offered basic training on manuscript preparation, syllabus interpretation, content structuring and the approaches to teaching language at the secondary level. As a local initiative,

the training of authors fell on the shoulders of project co-ordinators contrary to the standard practice in major writing projects where the publisher takes authors through an intensive in-house training programme.

A team of practising teachers was assembled to take up the task of writing. Because most of these teachers were first-time authors, it meant that they needed to be trained in basic principles of textbook writing. Loveridge et al. (1970) remind us that “when a writer has expertise in one aspect only, it becomes essential that he consult with someone who is expert in the other aspect.” In this regard, a series of workshops was convened where knowledgeable linguists and material designers were invited to share their knowledge with the identified authors. In the context of Nambya, it was agreed that there are many trained language teachers, although none of them had specialised in the language. However, their knowledge and experience in the teaching of Ndebele and English could add value to the writing of Nambya. A number of them were also pursuing studies in Language and linguistics, which added some merit to the initiative.

In many parts of the world, there is a venerable practice of having teachers as textbook writers. Bolitho (2010) argues, “Most of the successful authors of globally successful coursebooks started out as teachers, and their ideas are rooted in classroom practice”. In light of this view, the introduction of the textbook writing project in Nambya was conducted by selecting a group of teachers as textbook authors. The philosophical underpinnings for this are premised on the conviction that teachers, with their instantaneous teaching involvement, are capable of writing good textbooks. Going forward, this would increase the local base of skills and capabilities in the field of textbook writing as well as the production of other related instructional materials. With the books needed urgently, teachers were best placed to take up the task of writing. This would mean that they work in groups to enrich each other and produce a textbook that caters for a wide range of learning styles. Working in groups also ensured that all the manuscripts were developed simultaneously. Bolitho (2010) notes that “this team approach enables rapid progress to be made where the need for new textbooks is urgent”.

A series of writing-retreats and workshops were organised, hosted and coordinated by the Nambya Development Organisation Trust (NDOT). During these workshops, writers shared notes and knowledge of the Nambya language orthography to ensure that writers were familiar with the standard orthography. Regarding grammar, terminology was developed to assist writers with standard conventions and terms of reference in the teaching of grammar. It should be understood that most of the content and material that the writers were working with had never been taught. The only available sources for the grammar were manuscripts that were compiled by Christian missionaries written in English.

These are the manuscripts that writers would translate into Nambya.

6. Preparing the manuscripts

During this phase of manuscript preparation, workshop and writing retreat continued. Bolitho (2010) argues that for a variety of reasons, in textbook writing projects that involve working in teams, it is important to meet regularly. These periodic meetings in the form of workshops and seminars offer a platform for dialoguing on drafts, sharing of ideas, reviewing of workplans as well as forward planning. These meetings were an essential component throughout the project in order to review the checklist that guided the development of the textbook. Sheldon (1988) prescribes conditions and checklists to guide authors in preparing manuscripts and writing textbooks recommending that assessment checklists should be selected based on the teaching and learning context as well as specific needs of teachers and learners. In the case of Nambya writers, a tentative checklist was developed with two broad sections that encompass the general attributes of the textbook and the teaching and learning content of the book.

All they knew was that they wanted to produce books that would be used by teachers and learners in the schools. There was no particular size in terms of word count and number of pages. This was mainly because the textbook in question is the first to be written in the language. In that regard, anything written in the correct orthography and to the standard of other known languages being taught like Ndebele would suffice. The writers initially intended to get rights to translate a series of Ndebele textbooks; *Ihawu Labafundi*, a widely used text in the teaching of Ndebele. It was only upon the expert advice from a volunteer linguist that they opted to prepare manuscripts of their own. The argument was that the learners needed to be exposed to authentic language texts that are sensitive to their culture and so translating a text from another language would prejudice the learners by exposing them to content that is steeped in a different culture.

Initially, writers were grouped into thematic areas where each group worked on a particular section of the manuscripts. One group focused on generating comprehension and reading passages; the other group on Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) and language, while another group worked on the grammar section. Reading passages were to be varied to include prose, poetry, dialogue, letters and news articles. Within the prose genre, there was a conscious effort to include folklore, myths, legends as well as historical narratives. Indigenous Knowledge Systems included appropriate language use, taboos, norms, terminologies, culture and tradition among a wider spectrum of general knowledge. The grammar team focused on coming up

with a simple but comprehensive grammatical knowledge of the language using the manuscript written by missionaries as a main guiding tool. With the help of a linguist materials designer, the initial grammar content was compiled and divided into sections for inclusion in the middle secondary (book 3 and 4) textbook manuscripts. However, changes in the curriculum meant that grammar was explicitly taught from form 1, and the linguist team leader prepared guidelines for the skimming and extraction of grammatical content for inclusion in Book 1 and 2.

7. Publishing the Books

Publishers often shun manuscripts in the previously marginalised languages for a multiplicity of reasons. They find them unattractive as they may not bring the much-needed profit in publishing due to fewer numbers. The second reason for publishers to shun manuscripts in previously marginalised languages is that publishers lack the capacity and expertise to handle these languages in terms of editing and proof-reading. It may not be easy for them to find good editors and proof-readers to expedite the process of publishing texts. Faced with these challenges, the writers opted for self-publishing. The typesetting of the manuscripts would have to be done in-house. This added an extra burden on the materials designer as they needed to handle and typeset four manuscripts. This had the advantage of reducing costs and would allow the writers to retain the full writing of the work. Retaining the copyright is essential in this regard as the writers were looking forward to revising and improving the texts in the near future. It meant that writers should supply illustrations and pictures to accompany their manuscripts. Where these were not readily available, the designer would provide these.

8. Features of the New Nambya Learners' Textbook

A chapter template was designed that would incorporate the six components of the syllabus; comprehension passage, composition writing, summary, registers, language and Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS), as well as grammar and language structures as per the dictates of the National Indigenous Languages Syllabus. The Nambya Learners' textbook follows a communicative language learning approach as prescribed by the national Indigenous Languages' Syllabus. This approach to language learning is aimed at assisting learners to acquire a communicative as well as strategic competence in the target language. The selection and presentation of material and content are organised around six components of the language syllabus.

A prototype unit has activities organised around (1) pre-reading activities, (2) reading passages from any of the text genres, (3) Indigenous Knowledge System

(IKS) and language use, (4) grammar and language structures, (5) registers and situational language, and (6) creative writing. A distinctive feature of the textbook is that each unit is organised around a specific theme that links all the components and activities in that unit. The four major language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are explored in each unit, moving from the lower to the higher-order skills within the theme. This closely pursues the principles of material design (Nunan, 1988). He classifies these into six broad criteria that state that materials should: (a) promote the objectives of the curriculum prescribed by the syllabus, (b) be authentic, (c) stimulate interaction among the learners and between learners and the teacher, (d) prompt the learners to pay attention to the formal aspects of language, (e) inspire learners to progress in their learning skills, and (f) inspire learners to put to use their developing skills to the world outside the classroom.

The organisation of content and activities around components of the syllabus is motivated by the need to assist teachers in structuring and organising their own work schedule and avoid the temptation of over-teaching some components while woefully ignoring others. A single template was adopted for all the books in the series. Such a structure becomes the signature of the series while giving learners and teachers a sense of continuity as they transition from one level to another. It gives them a feeling of security as familiarity with the text at every level, and such a structure facilitates a smooth transition between levels.

9. Conclusions

In this paper, the attempt has been to trace the steps in developing textbooks for a language that does not have a single text. We call attention to the intricacies that are involved in the textbook development enterprise for marginalised languages by focusing on how the Nambya textbook series *Bhwazulani* was developed. From a revival theoretical linguistics standpoint, the argument is that a textbook is a major resource for language revitalisation and any serious attempts to revitalise languages should have textbook and other materials development as a key activity of the programme. Textbook development is a mammoth task. The textbook itself is more than just a compilation of reading passages and exercises on grammar written in the language. A lot of work and effort goes into textbook writing. This is more than doubled in contexts where there is no existing material, and the textbook is the first in the language. Over and above the need to meet syllabus and examination requirements, there are many demands that textbook writers need to pay attention. They must also design their work to fit in with the actual physical and economic conditions which prevail in the classrooms (Loveridge et al., 1970). The textbook needs to be culturally sensitive while meeting the educational needs of the learners. On the technical side, all the textbooks in a single series need to be coherent. Based on

the project, the major objective was to develop a series of textbooks that would be used throughout the four years of secondary school. A volume was dedicated to each year resulting in four books that complete the set. Subsequent studies can thus focus on improving the series by paying attention to technical-visual or physical values of the textbooks as pedagogical materials and then provide a means of assessment. Although issues of quality and other physical values were borne in mind throughout the project, the need to have a textbook series was the overriding goal.

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