

# **DEVELOPING A DISTANCE EDUCATION IN-SERVICE PROGRAMME IN NAMIBIA**

## **Teacher Education through Materials Development.**

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### **Introduction**

While still teaching at CELTE, University of Warwick, I took part in a collaborative venture to produce a distance education programme to improve the English of primary teachers in Namibia.<sup>(1)</sup> This paper describes the often messy process of designing the course whose multidimensional nature presented interesting challenges to the writing team.

The paper first looks at the context for which the course was designed in order to justify its goal. After describing the design process it examines issues which arose and then looks at implications for teacher education in involving teachers in materials development.

### **Context**

In June 1991, when the first workshop took place Namibia had enjoyed a year of independence and had embarked on an educational reform programme. An important feature of this was the introduction of a predominantly English medium policy in schools, after initial years of mother tongue instruction.

Even superficial knowledge of the educational system indicated that this new language policy would present problems for the majority of teachers who had been deprived of adequate English instruction by the Bantu Education policy of the previous South African administration.

The obvious dearth of English within Namibia in the early 1990s clearly made it essential for the new Ministry of Education and Culture to act immediately to improve the English of primary teachers. The main goal of the distance education programme was thus centred on this need. More specifically, the programme aimed at increasing the confidence of teachers in speaking English by offering them opportunities to do so

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in study groups, after listening to an English language broadcast presented by the Namibian Broadcasting Services.

The project was British ODA funded in conjunction with the Ministry of Education and Culture in Windhoek and the Namibian Broadcasting Service. The Adult Education division of the Ministry was directly involved in the planning and implementation of the programme. The project was managed at the design stage by the International Extension College (IEC) in London; IEC staff guided the design of the course books from the distance education perspective, and directed the recording of the radio programmes.

The BBC English Language Teaching division was involved in training and acting as consultants for the radio programme, working with their Namibian counterparts in the Namibian Broadcasting Service (which was to record and present the programme nationally). A BBC consultant also supervised and edited the production of scripts for the programmes. Namibian broadcasters visited the BBC in the U.K for additional training.

Two English language teaching specialists were also invited to participate on the team to guide the design of language activities for the course books. One of these acted as editor between workshops.

Finally a new Namibian publishing company, New Namibia, was responsible for co-editing and publishing the course books. The project was thus multidimensional in the sense that several different specialist groups were responsible for producing the materials. And it was from the outset a collaborative venture in which Namibian teachers and broadcasters were very actively involved.

## **The Design Process**

### **Preliminary Planning**

One of the reasons for complexities in the design process was the involvement of so many interest groups and it was necessary for a certain amount of preliminary planning to establish as much common ground as possible. Early meetings took place in Windhoek and London and some decisions were taken at management level which were to guide the later development of the course.

One such decision, taken only tentatively initially, was that each course unit would be linked to a radio programme of 30 minutes and this would start with a 'school soap' based on an imaginary Namibian school. The programme would also include language activities and other items. The suggestion of a 'soap' led to extensive discussion as to the cultural appropriateness of this genre; however early fears that it would not be sufficiently familiar to Namibian audiences proved unfounded.

A second decision was that the radio programmes would be linked to study groups of primary teachers throughout the country. These adult education groups, arranged by the Ministry, would use both the programme and two course books to guide their group activities. These activities would focus mainly on increasing oral fluency.

A crucial decision was that the programmes and the books should be written by Namibian teachers and broadcasters. This added a whole dimension of teacher (and broadcaster) education to the project. The political-historical context in which teachers were involved meant that themes, topics and goals were given a new dimension of social reconstruction. This will be discussed later in the paper.

Finally it was planned that the radio programmes and course books should be completed in three workshops (June and September 1991; April 1992). During this time participants were to complete 32 radio programmes and two course books with 32 units. Editing work would continue between workshops and after the final one.

#### *Developing a production process*

The main goal of the first workshop in June 1991 was to bring together all the consultants and participants in order to continue planning and to train the writers. However in order to keep to schedule it would also be necessary to produce drafts of four units including broadcasts. Everyone attended the initial training sessions in which consultants led workshops in the following areas:

- i) production of distance education materials: format and activity types
- ii) production of broadcast scripts and language activities appropriate for radio
- iii) production of fluency focussed activities based on all language skills but emphasizing oral competence

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A further session was held in which participants led by the two ELT specialists devised a syllabus of topics, functions and some structures which they considered relevant and important in achieving the goals of the course. At this stage the value of teacher participation began to emerge as they were able to provide useful input for the syllabus lists.

After these sessions participants worked in groups and sketched outlines for the first four units in terms of topics, functions and structures. It was agreed that considerable flexibility should be allowed and the outlines would be fleshed out and even amended as writing progressed. The idea was that the groups would then begin to draft the first four units. We thought that the unit outline would be adequate in guiding the process.

### Emerging problems in the design process

#### *CRISIS 1.*

Even at the outline stage problems began to emerge in the process of design. If the outline was too prescriptive the broadcasters found themselves constrained by the need to include a topic or language item, sometimes very artificially.

However the really big problem emerged when the drafting began. Some groups were designated for writing the course book units, others the scripts for the radio programme. After the familiar agony of attempting to get a creative process started, it became clear that the course book groups could not create anything meaningful without first knowing what the radio programme would comprise. Out of this problem we realised that we had not considered carefully enough the link between the broadcast and the study group course book. The course book had to reinforce the radio programme but it also had to expand into oral activities and even some suggested writing activities that focussed on group interaction e.g. role play, simulations, debates, letter and report writing.

Back to the drawing board and emergency planning sessions. We realised that everything depended on the broadcast and the way in which it was to link with the course book. The need for course book writers to know what was in the radio programme before drafting was resolved in the following way. The BBC consultants together with a small group of very competent teachers and broadcasters drafted the scripts for several 'Namib School' soap episodes (about ten minutes each). These were read out to all participants and evaluated. Here again the involvement of Namibian



teachers was crucial and lively discussions followed about the suitability of some of the issues raised in the scripts e.g. should we discuss school girl pregnancies on air; was it fair to make the school principal so negative; did young people really behave in this or that way in Namibia? Needless to say not all the Namibian participants agreed with one another, but it would have been immeasurably more complex to make valid decisions without them.

## *CRISIS 2*

Once the scripts had been evaluated, the course book writers could select language and topics for the units, and drafting began again. But the writers still struggled with the link and discussions about this crystallised around the uncertainty about how the radio programmes and the study groups would work in the reality of a teaching context.

The questions that caused difficulties for the writers were:

Would the teachers really be able to meet together at the exact time of the radio broadcast and work on language activities together?

This meant that the timing of the programmes was crucial.

When would they be broadcast? Or could we rely on all groups having access to tapes or recording facilities?

These questions were crucial to the types of language activities envisaged for the radio programme and the answers to them would determine the way in which the course book units linked to the programmes.

These questions were discussed at length although I am not sure that we ever fully resolved them; it was difficult to do so when other ministries and institutions were involved. The usual compromise plans had to be agreed upon so that drafting could recommence. There were team members who probably quite correctly felt that some teachers would never be part of a study group and that we needed to cater for the lone individual who wanted to participate. I think this was tacitly accepted and some efforts were made to introduce activities for this type of audience.

It was also agreed that tapes of the radio programmes were essential to overcome the practical problems of convening study groups at the time of the broadcasts. Thus the writers could work on confident that the teachers would somehow be able to listen to the programme as they sat in their study groups.

This also solved the problem of linking the radio programme to the unit since the initial course book activities could be pre-listening activities prior to the radio broadcast (or tape). This would be followed by a 'Now listen to the radio programme' signal in the course book, and an 'After you have listened' sign post.

### *CRISIS 3*

'After you have listened'? What then? We realised that the initial activities would have to be language focussed since the English proficiency of some teachers might be inadequate in dealing with later work. But the radio programme also had language activities focussed on vocabulary or functions. The course book writers increasingly felt they needed to know about these radio based activities before proceeding with the unit.

After lengthy discussions, this was resolved by the BBC consultant requesting that all teachers be involved with drafting language activities for the radio programme first. Only once these were drafted and edited would the writing groups be able to read the scripts and continue with the course book.

From what I would term the creative confusion at the start of the project a writing process emerged as follows:

- i) developing unit outlines from the syllabus (all groups)
- ii) drafting the script for several episodes of the 'soap' at a time and evaluating them (one drama group)
- iii) drafting language activities for the radio programmes (some of the broadcasting team at this stage also went in search of authentic material for interview recording etc)
- iv) writing groups drafting units of the course book while broadcasting groups started recording programmes

This process was followed for the remaining two workshops. The description above does not include discussions about the format and illustrating of the books and two heavy editing sessions between workshops 2 and 3 and after workshop 3.

It could be argued that some or all of these teething problems should have been foreseen before the start of the writing workshops. Certainly those involved learnt a

great deal about the complexity of co-ordinating different components of a distance education programme of this type and would be forewarned for future endeavours. It was a feat of management to keep the whole process moving and to see it successfully completed in time for the course to begin in 1992, and to be in general positively evaluated in 1993. Much of this success was the result of enthusiastic commitment of all the team particularly the teacher writers.

### **Issues arising from the design process**

Some interesting tensions emerged as the production of the multidimensional course progressed; these may be useful to future planners.

#### **i. Differences of approach to language activities and learning**

In the initial planning and training a quite radical difference of approach became evident between the distance education view of language activities and the view of the two ELT specialists.

Distance education often takes into account the individual student working alone and focusses on reading and writing. The activities suggested in the distance education training session seemed at times extremely controlled and restricted to the ELT view of fluency focussed language learning. Both sides had to recognise the value of different approaches and to blend the two in the course book units.

There was also a definite difference of approach to language learning between the BBC producers and the ELT specialists. What is possible for language teaching through radio is again quite strongly influenced by an audiolingual approach, with a focus on discrete items, unless the programme is taped and can be replayed for global comprehension activities. We found this particularly affected the listening comprehension activities since we could not assume that everyone would definitely have tapes and be able to listen to the text a number of times.

#### **ii. Production organisation**

As mentioned above a major issue was the organisation of production of the different aspects of the course. I think we would all now acknowledge that this has to be more carefully thought out before workshopping begins. One minor issue that arose was the need for any one group not to effect too many changes after course book writing began. Occasionally during recording sessions the BBC and Extension College producers would make alterations to language items, only to discover that they had removed some words or functions that had been introduced into the course book unit.

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This created headaches for the editors and incurred the wrath of participants generally. However the broadcasters would probably argue that they were constrained by the need not to make improvements during rehearsals for recording.

### iii. The role of editors

The role of the editors in a collaborative project of this type also became a source of contention and debate. Obviously when material is being produced by inexperienced writers the need for editing may be heavy. However, the fact that so many were involved in writing meant that a democratic process was involved and once decisions were taken about units it was difficult for writers, however inexperienced, to accept the need for radical changes to units without consultation.

### iv. Teachers as materials writers

The value of having teachers as writers was undisputed. Their knowledge of the local context and teachers' interests played a significant role in producing lively and relevant programmes and materials. However it is necessary to face some of the difficulties in using teachers as writers in this kind of context. The most substantial one is the fact that many of the teachers were trained in an authoritarian and grammar based approach to language learning; a few training sessions are not going to be adequate in altering their view of learning materials. This was partly overcome by ensuring a mix within each group of teachers who were familiar with interactive activities and those who were less experienced with them. However the democratic nature of the project (and the increasing global emphasis on restoring grammar to the language classroom) meant that again compromises were made and more attention was paid to grammar than had been originally intended in a fluency focussed course.

### Implications for teacher education and development

Apart from learning to grapple with the unexpected problems in the process of designing and writing the course, the experience gained on this project reinforced our belief that there are unplanned benefits in involving teachers in developing course materials. As the process progressed a hidden curriculum developed and assumed increasing importance to all the participants. Outcomes that had not necessarily been envisaged took on an importance of their own.

The most important implication was that it became an in-service training programme for the teacher writers. By participating in the workshop they were introduced to new principles of ELT methodology and applied these principles to materials development. No strong claims can be made for the lasting effect of this form of in-service but it



would be interesting to evaluate their teaching behaviour after the project. Certainly participants all became familiar with the principles of information gap, transfer, task dependency and prediction and were aware of their value in bringing about interaction.

Another implication was that the project actually introduced a learner centred approach to education to the primary teachers who would form study groups. This was one of the main policy decisions of education reforms in Namibia and the course `Lets Speak English` was an early attempt to use such an approach. By involving teachers themselves in problem solving and interactive activities in all subject areas, it would suggest the value of the approach in a very practical way.

A further `hidden` agenda emerged from the fact that Namibians played such an important role in the production process. Their choice of topics and issues for use in the drama and in fluency activities meant that the course as a whole took on a strongly `social reconstructionist` role. By fearlessly introducing topics like corruption, sexism, racism and human rights the teachers used the course to start debate on these topics in a very public programme. Again the timing and political context of the project made this feature almost inevitable and gave it an added importance since the teacher writers felt deeply involved in the type of interactive activity they were creating.

A less central but nevertheless much discussed feature of the broadcasts was the decision to use a wide range of accents and varieties of English. This was done very deliberately to challenge the view in some sectors of the Namibian public that only one variety of English was `acceptable`. The alternative view, that Namibians have to deal with local as well as international forms of English, was a strong feature of the radio programmes. The view was strongly challenged and some criticism of the use of English in the programmes inevitably surfaced.

### **Conclusion**

The multidimensional approach to distance education materials production described above was an invaluable learning process for all the specialists involved. The preliminary planning and preparation, inevitably, was sometimes flawed. We would have benefitted from a more thorough survey of teachers` needs and wishes both with regard to course content and the timing of the programme (some needs analysis was done but not extensively enough). We learnt as we progressed about the complexity of co-ordinating the demands and often conflicting views of a team of consultants coming from different disciplines and needing to create a unified whole. The team was

surprisingly successful in accommodating one another's idiosyncracies but not without the pain that inevitably comes from sacrificing strongly held views on learning.

Above all we understood through participating in the project that there are a surprising number of unexpected and valuable outcomes in a process involving teachers as writers of course materials.

The value of their presence far outweighs the possible disadvantages of slowing down the process through training. It adds to the authenticity and relevance of the materials and it adds immeasurably to the awareness of the teacher writers themselves. It also effectively puts paid to the notion that overseas consultants are all that a project needs to develop a successful language course.

Note: 1 Ministry of Education and Culture 1992.

*Let's Speak English.* New Namibia Books, Windhoek, Namibia.