
A Back Transition Primer: National language to vernacular¹

by Leah B. Walter

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One of the first questions translation teams ask when determining program strategy is: Are there people who are literate or semi-literate in the national language? If so, how can we get them reading in their own language?

In Colombia, the Catholic Church has been generally responsible for education in indigenous communities for over 100 years. In most of these communities, there are many people who are literate in Spanish to some degree. Even though the transition back into reading their own language would not appear to be difficult, few have made this “back transition.” One reason may be that, orthographically, the vernacular looks so different and difficult. Another may be that the potential reader is only semiliterate, able to recognize letters and to sound out syllables, but unable to read with facility and comprehension.

After looking over the situation in Colombia, it became evident to me that, even in languages where there are minimal orthographic differences between Spanish and the vernacular, something was needed to facilitate and encourage the transfer from Spanish to the mother tongue. I saw the problem more clearly when I visited a large language community in the Vaupés. In the Vaupés area, there were many adults and young people literate in Spanish, but few who were able to read in their own language. Since Spanish and the Vaupés languages use orthographies that are similar, it would seem that a reader of Spanish, who is a vernacular speaker, should need minimal training to transfer his reading skills from Spanish to his own language.

As I made my own little survey, I was curious as to why they would not or could not make the transition. Most said that they hesitated because no one had ever shown them how. I knew this was not the only reason (it could also be lack of motivation or other pressures), but this helped bring into focus the problem and the possible solution. I had been thinking about printing inexpensive, self-teaching booklets to help motivate those who read Spanish to read their own language.

Just before the Desano New Testament went to press, Jim and Marion Miller approached me about reprinting their ABC book so that they could distribute it along with the New Testament. The purpose would be to introduce the letters of the Desano alphabet so Desanos literate in

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Spanish could make an easy transition into Desano. Since I had been thinking about transition booklets, I suggested that they develop and print a small (10-page) transition booklet, instead of reprinting the ABC book. The transition booklet would be simple, self-teaching, and inexpensive. The Millers were busy getting the New Testament ready for press, so I agreed to help them.

I had already done some research in the area of transition primers, both in Colombia and elsewhere. One article that I found most useful was “*Transition primers ... Spanish to the idiom?*” by Georgia Hunter (Novalit 5.1, May 1977). With ideas gathered from the article, plus a transition primer by Stephen Levinsohn, a Tucano transition primer we were working on, and my own past experience, I began working with the Millers’ language teacher, Eduardo, to develop the transition primer.

Foremost in my thinking was to make each step easy. Eduardo and I had a list of letters used in Desano but not used in Spanish (u, w, and six nasalized vowels), as well as letters that had the same symbol as Spanish but a different quality (r, h /ʔ/, and g /ng/). Jim and Marion gave us a suggested order of introducing these letters and combinations of letters. We also had a pronunciation guide (required in the front of all vernacular publications) for (1) letters appearing in the vernacular but not in the national language, and for (2) letters that are the same in the national language but represent different sound qualities in the vernacular.

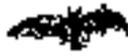
Las veintisiete (27) letras del alfabeto desano son las siguientes:

a, ã, b, c, (qu), d, e, ɛ, g, h, i, ĩ, j, m, n, ñ, o, o, p, r, s, t, u, ũ, w, w, y

De estas letras las siguientes se pronuncian igual que en castellano:

a, b, c, d, e, i, j, m, n, ñ, o, p, q(u), r, s, t, u, y

Ahora ya puede leer estas palabras en desano!

 abe (el sol)	 diaya (el perro)	 yese (el cerdo)
 ojo (los bananos)	 uju (el pacu)	 oyo (el murcielago)

1

We listed the letters that were represented by the same symbol and had the same sound quality and encouraged the reader by saying, “Now you can read [the following] words in

Desano!" Eduardo chose six picturable words made up of letters listed. Each picture was boxed in with the word below the picture, in both Desano and Spanish.

We then introduced a letter that appears in the Desano alphabet, but not in Spanish, by describing the letter's phonetic character. (This description was taken from the booklet's pronunciation guide.) We again found a few words (four this time) made up of the new letter and other letters previously listed. Eduardo wrote a few phrases for reading practice.

We continued in this way until all letters and sounds that do not appear in the Spanish alphabet were introduced.

Las letras distintas del castellano son:
ā, ē, ī, ō, ū, ɣ, ɥ, h, w

También hay otras letras que suenan un poco diferente, aunque son las mismas que tienen en castellano, estas son:

r, g

1. La letra ɣ.

La letra ɣ suena como la 'u' en castellano, pero sin redondear los labios.

 ɣɣ (una culebra)	 teri (la trampa)
Bagɣimi. (El está comiendo.)	
Yɣpagɣ. (Mi padre.)	

2

All instructions were written in Spanish. It was hoped, however, that each step was simple enough that even semi-literates could teach themselves by using the pictures. The last two pages contained a motivational story.

Within one week, working one hour daily, we had the first rough copy completed. The booklet then went through the regular check with other Desano speakers before being printed, and it was then distributed along with the New Testament. The Millers have not been able to return to the language area since their short two-day distribution trip, so I am unable to give an evaluative report of the booklets' effectiveness.

This type of transition booklet has been reproduced in six other languages, with the addition of a list of other books available in the language placed in the back of the booklet. The book list is intended to encourage those who have just learned to read in their language to read more! This has proven to be a valuable and inexpensive way to help members of indigenous language communities who already read Spanish learn to read quickly in their own language.

In one area, government educators were excited about the booklet. They wanted to make certain that all teachers, who were speakers of that language, got a copy of it so they could learn how to read and write in their language.

The booklet has been a valuable tool in indigenous writers' courses. It can be used to help new participants make the transition from Spanish to the vernacular, and also serves as a review for those who already can read and write to some degree.

3. El problema de la r.

Quando la r sigue las letras "e" u "i" suena como la "r" de castellano (como en la palabra "para")

Lea las siguientes palabras:

	
gasiru (la canoa)	quera (el perezoso)

Quando la r sigue "a", "o" y "u" suena casi como la "r" del castellano (como en la palabra "lapiz").

	
bari (la comida)	turi (la trampa)

Ahora puede leer las siguientes frases!

Imiria seme soramo.
Imiria bare soramo.
(Emilia cocina la papa.
Emilia cocina la comida.)

4

Producing the transition booklet is easy. Prerequisites include: 1) a working orthography approved, 2) a simple phonology statement, and 3) a word list or small dictionary.

With the prerequisites completed, the major steps follow:

A. Make lists of what needs to be introduced or taught.

1. List letters in the vernacular orthography.
2. List letters that are the same in the national and vernacular languages.
3. List letters appearing in the orthography of the vernacular but not in the national language.
4. List letters that are the same but represent different sound qualities in the vernacular, as opposed to the national language.
5. List consonant and vowel combinations occurring in the vernacular, but not in the national language, that may need to be introduced.

B. List the order of the elements to be taught.

1. Begin with letters that represent the same sound in both languages.
2. Introduce letters that occur in the vernacular but not in the national language.
3. Introduce letters that appear in the national language but represent different sounds in the vernacular.
4. Introduce the consonant and vowel combinations that occur in the vernacular. (Many of these can be taught in context and need not be introduced separately.)

The decision as to when to introduce these elements will depend on the following:

- Frequency of occurrence (For example, in Desano we chose to introduce the new vowel sound u, then all nasalized vowels, making it easier for Eduardo to identify useful picturable words and to write natural sentences.)
- Ease of learning (Desanos find it easier to learn letters that do not appear in Spanish over ones that are the same but represent different sound qualities, so we taught those first.)

C. Choose a format that is easy to follow. Each lesson should be uniform. Remember that the book is to be self-teaching.

1. Remember that all instruction should be in the national language.
2. Introduce the new letter with a simple explanation of that letter's phonetic character written in the national language.
3. Encourage the reader by stating often, "You can now read the following words...!"
4. Include the translation of the vernacular on the same page. (Some people prefer to have the translation in the back of the book. I like to include the translation of the

words and simple phrases and stories on the same page. The translation of the longer story, included on the last pages, should be in the back of the book. We decided not to include a translation of the last story in the Desano primer. We hoped this would force the reader to read the Desano. It was thought that some readers would read only the Spanish translation if it were available.)

5. After the picturable words, include a few phrases of short story with picture, if desired.
6. Continue in this way until all new letters and sound combinations are introduced.
7. Finish the booklet with a story or message that will interest all.
8. List other books available in the language and where they can be obtained.

Leah B. Walter was coordinator and module author for the LinguaLinks Literacy Workshop. Prior to taking this position, she did fieldwork in Mexico (Tzeltal language project), Guatemala, and Colombia (1967–1988), as trainer, literacy specialist, literacy consultant and literacy coordinator. She taught applied linguistics (Literacy Principles and Materials) courses at various universities. Walter received a B.A. from BIOLA University in California in 1966 and has done graduate work in linguistics and adult education.