

Literacy Teachers Online for Children (LITOC)

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LITOC – LABE’s innovative approach to publishing focuses on primary school teachers producing reading material in five underserved languages: Acoli in northern Uganda, Aringa ti in Yumbe district, Kakwa in Koboko district, Lugbara ti in Arua district and Ma’di in Adjumani district – the latter four in the West Nile region. These marginalized, post conflict zones suffer from a severe shortage of reading material, inadequate continuous professional development for in-service teachers (Altinyelken 2010, World Bank-SABER 2012), poor literacy rates amongst primary school children and negative attitudes amongst parents and teachers towards local languages as the medium of instruction in lower primary classes.

The use of local languages in Uganda’s education system has greatly diminished in the post-independence era and English has taken centre stage, but without an improvement in the low literacy levels across the country (Mango Tree Lanö Literacy Project Report, 2010; Piper & Miksick, 2011; Uganda National Examinations Board, 2010; Uwezo, 2011, 2012). The 1992 White Paper on Education stipulated that the medium of instruction during the first three years of primary school education was to be the relevant local language (Tembe 2006: 859) – with the hope of improving literacy skills particularly among rural children. Mother Tongue education was reintroduced in Uganda in 2006/2007 in the Thematic Curriculum (in the fourth year of primary education the local language stops being the medium of instruction and instead is taught as a subject). Tembe suggests there have been inconsistencies in Thematic Curriculum implementation (2008: 210), one of the main issues being the fact that teachers are not trained to teach in Ugandan languages, although they receive training in the teaching of English (Tembe 2006). According to Kasozi, the book to student ratio for primary schools is one book between thirteen students (2015). In 2012 UWEZO reported that in Uganda one out of every ten children assessed in Primary Three was able to read a Primary Two level story; in their 2016 report this figure increased to two out of ten (UWEZO 2016). In addition to this literacy in local languages assessments yielded the same, if not worse results (UWEZO 2012 & 2016). All in all reading rates in both local languages and English is low in Uganda, for adults and children (FEMRITE 2015).

LITOC is an element within LABE’s Mother Tongue project and forms a dynamic response to the Ministry of Education and Sports’ (MoES) Mother Tongue Education Policy that aims to increase learning outcomes of children in primary school. LITOC uses ICT to address not only the lack of reading material in local languages in rural primary schools, but also the need to provide CPD for teachers in using local languages in the classroom and to bring them from the PO Box era into the .com era.

The aim of LITOC is to transform the way books for lower primary pupils in local languages are developed, procured, produced and supplied – especially for rural schools – by overcoming challenges in centralized print based publishing operations: books with lexical and grammatical inaccuracies developed by writers who are not language experts; books with too many words per page for beginner readers to decode developed by publishers unaware of pedagogical issues; books in a language that is not the medium of instruction and too few books reaching pupils – due to inefficiencies in MoES strict procurement procedures and a poorly managed book supply chain. LABE’s intervention engages lower primary school teachers and

Language Board (bodies established by Government as custodians of the local language to generate orthographies and check the written language in educational books) members at the centre of content development and production in 12 ICT hubs in rural primary schools.

To date, teachers have produced over 200 stories by working in collaborative groups with local Language Board members to plan, write, word process, format, illustrate, scan, peer review, edit, design, layout and save decodable, leveled reading material focusing on reading instruction and practice in the local language. The stories use key words from the Thematic Curriculum and are organized and structured in a reading scheme with 8 levels: level 1 has 1 word (divided into syllables) and repeated as a whole word with one picture per page; level 2 has 2-5 words and one picture per page and level 8 has 100 words per page without pictures. Levels 1–5 are simple products; a single sheet of paper, folded once, forming 4 pages. Levels 6, 7 and 8 have yet to be written, and will be text only, more pages, bound and stapled.

Solar powered computers have been installed together with lightning conductors, inverters and batteries, and lights enable teachers to continue using this equipment in the evenings. Currently LABE is working on internet access for all of the hubs by adding routers and engaging internet service providers to align signal dishes for optimum transmission.

All electronic files are hosted on a purpose-built multi-lingual website. If a teacher finds a resource they need, but it is not in their local language, they will be able to download, translate then upload a new file to the relevant language area. Mass production (using files from the website) in school holidays has the potential to ensure the right books reach pupils at the right time. Google analytics will facilitate demand forecasting pinpointing which resources to print. Furthermore, the forum on the multi-lingual website will enable teachers to share experiences and ideas and form a content generating / sharing / translating / teaching community of practice – enabling them to implement the Thematic Curriculum with confidence.

Excited and highly motivated teachers have been creating, translating and producing stories that will directly impact on pupils' learning by boosting their reading fluency and giving them the best chance of using their local language literacy skills to learn English more effectively in P4 – the transition year.

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