



Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium

Volume 4 | Issue 1

Article 13

3-30-1978

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BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Hansen, Dorothy M. (1978) "Teaching Literacy in the Book of Mormon," *Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol4/iss1/13>

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TEACHING LITERACY IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

Dorothy M. Hansen

This is a report of and observations on experiences gained while conducting a pilot advanced literacy project for the Church Education System in Mexico City during the summer of 1977.

A beginning literacy program has been used by the Church Education System throughout Central and South America. This program teaches basic phonics skills and teaches the students to read any words within their speaking vocabulary. The standard of the Church literacy program is for every member to be able to read and understand the scriptures. Students coming out of the basic literacy program are sometimes able to go directly into the scriptures but often are not. This project was an attempt to teach members of the Church with marginal literacy skills how to read and understand the scriptures. The project was based on the following assumptions: 1) that phonics and vocabulary skills are not adequate to insure the higher levels of comprehension required by the scriptures; 2) that it is unnecessary to use a graded approach to produce literacy in the scriptures, and 3) that the scriptures are a content specific area which require specific reading skills; in other words, a general competency in literacy can not be assumed to be adequate to enable a person to fully understand the scriptures, but other techniques above and beyond general literacy skills have to be brought to bear for effective comprehension in the scriptures.

An advisory committee, chaired by Arthur H. King, and including Don Norton, Frank Otto, Frank Santiago, C. Victor Bunderson, and Olivia Rojas contributed to the project. A pilot group in Mexico City was begun by Sandi Amend, a graduate student in the BYU Spanish department, during Spring term of 1977. This group was comprised of marginally literate women who had some basic phonics skills but who complained that they could not understand or remember anything they read (a common problem in a phonetic language). Sandi was successful in teaching this pilot group, and teachers were called and set apart by the Stake President to teach the course to members of the stake in each ward and branch in the Arbolillo Stake. Sandi then taught the lessons to these teachers who in turn taught them to their students. It is the experiences of the native teachers and their students that will be reported here.

A Description of the Lessons

The lessons were designed to mix strategy with content. That is, the principles of scriptural comprehension were taught using the first principles of the gospel as the content. Our belief was that the insight that would come from applying these comprehension principles to meaningful content would provide the greatest motivation for the students to continue reading. The lessons began by encouraging the students to apply the pattern of learning found in the scriptures: faith, study, and prayer in an atmosphere of love. The purpose and origin of the Book of Mormon were discussed, with particular stress on the beginning and ending parts of the book. The title page was examined in detail, as was Moroni 10, Moroni's parting message to those who hundreds of years later would read the book he sealed up. Particular emphasis was put on the Isaiah passage which is found at the end of the tenth chapter of Moroni: "And awake, and arise from the dust O Jerusalem, and put on thy beautiful garments O daughter of Zion, and strengthen thy stakes and enlarge thy borders forever, that thou mayest no more be confounded, that the covenants of the Eternal Father which he hath made unto thee, O House of Israel, may be fulfilled." (Mor. 10:30) We asked: What would it feel like to awake and arise from the dust? What does it feel like to put on beautiful garments? By getting at the feelings which figurative language is designed to elicit, we were able to get to a level of comprehension with these people that surprised us. The second lesson was designed to introduce them to the writers of the Book of Mormon. In keeping with the philosophy of the course of intermingling content and strategy, we taught them how to find references by showing them what the records meant to each one of the writers who kept them. We talked about how Nephi mined the ore, and smelted the ore, and formed the plates with his own hands. Nephi looked forward to the time when these plates would come forth and be a great blessing to those who read them. We read Jacob's words about the contents of these special plates and his poignant statement that they had been a lonesome and sorrowful people, that their days had passed as if it were a dream.

Enos, the son of Jacob, had taken the records and been concerned for their preservation. He pleaded with the Lord that the records would not fall into the hands of the Lamanites, but would be preserved and come forth at a later time to convert the seed of the Lamanites who were then trying to destroy the records. The lesson ends with the special meaning of the plates to the prophet Mormon. At age 10, he was told where to find the records. When he was age 14 he went to the hill Shim and took charge of them. At 15 Mormon saw the Lord and at 16 he lead the Nephite armies even though he knew the people were headed for sure destruction. As we

read Chapters 6 and 7 of Mormon, we felt the anguish that Mormon felt as he watched the people he loved being destroyed. He left an eloquent message to those who would read the records hundreds of years from that time. And then Mormon left the records to his son Moroni. Moroni wandered the earth alone, carrying the records, keeping charge of them, protecting them, adding to them, continuing his father's work until he sealed up the records in the Hill Cumorah. We read Moroni's final testimony and his plea for the House of Israel and all people to lay hold upon the spiritual gifts that always accompany the gospel of Jesus Christ on the earth. We talked about the feelings that Moroni must have had when some fourteen hundred years later he was permitted to show the young prophet Joseph Smith where the records had been hidden in the Hill Cumorah.

Having introduced the book and the writers, we next turned to the principles of comprehension. First we discussed the principle of repetition. Important ideas can be identified by what is repeated within a passage. Using the doctrinal principle of faith, we showed how repetition occurs in at least three forms in the scriptures: the repetition of exact words, the repetition of synonymous words and ideas, and repetition by example. We also taught the principle of asking questions to elicit comprehension, showing that comprehension is determined by the types of questions that are asked as one reads. Asking the questions, what is it? why is it important? what are its results? how do we obtain it? and what is an example? we discussed the principle of faith as it was defined in different parts of the Book of Mormon. We also made the point that in the scriptures no concept is ever explained in its entirety in any one place. It is as we find the different points of repetition throughout the scriptures that we come to understand the concept fully and completely. We learned that faith produced miracles, the visitation of angels, the way to hold on every good thing, and the way to become a son of God; that it comes by obedience, by repentance, by asking, and by working as hard as one can work. We examined the example of Nephi going back to obtain the plates from Laban and the example of the Brother of Jared, and asked what those two examples had in common. We asked what symbols were associated with the principle of faith and discovered that in Alma 32 the superlatives, purest, whitest, and sweetest were found and that these would take on an added meaning in another lesson.

The lesson on symbols explored Lehi's vision and Nephi's interpretation of that vision. We also taught students to look for associated words through the scriptures. We traced some of the major symbols through the scriptures. In particular, the fruit of the tree of life and the fountain of living waters represent the love of God and his mercy is commonly couched in these symbols.

We used the comprehension principle of contrast embedded in the doctrinal principle of repentance and drawing on repetition and question, explored Alma 36 and discovered the beautiful chiasmic structure of that chapter. We showed how an awareness of both structure and content gives the classic gestalt comprehension wherein the meaning of the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

We showed how ideas relate to each other by exploring the concept of the atonement using the cross-referencing system and showing how the cross-referencing system operates upon the principles of repetition. We taught inference by the accumulation of imagery and using this principle showed how Isaiah passages could be understood. Throughout the lessons we stressed the need to put oneself in the lessons, that the scriptures contained patterns that answer personal problems. We used recall patterns to improve both comprehension and retention of what had been read. Recall patterns, instead of outlines, allowed us to capitalize on a type of thinking we called non-linear logic--an undefinable term that is best understood by contrasting it with our flow-chart logic.

Results

The results were measured by pre- and post-objective tests and pre- and post-questionnaires. We found that the results very much depended upon the teachers. One teacher started with twenty students and ended up with two. All of the other teachers kept between two-thirds and three-fourths of their students. Of 63 who took the pre-test, thirty-three students finished the lessons. In analyzing the results this group was divided into those who had a 6th grade or below education and those who had an 8th grade or above education. We had no one who had had a 7th grade education, so we simply eliminated that grade in classifying the educational levels. The students were given an objective pre- and post-test taken from Alma 5, each test covering 20 verses. Ten questions were asked on those 20 verses, giving a fairly comprehensive test of comprehension. The pre-to-post gain for the 6th and below group was 34 points. The gain for the 8th and above was 8 points, for an average of 24 points. However, it should be noted that when the tests were given to a Book of Mormon class at Brigham Young University the average score on the post-test was approximately 11 points lower than the average score on the pre-test and that the post-test results for the Mexican group would have been higher had the tests been comparable. The questionnaire results were positive. Out of several hundred total responses, fewer than ten were negative at all. A large number of students wanted to go through the course again. Many of them requested more lessons and said that they finally understood the scriptures for the first time.

While the objective test data and the questionnaire results were favorable, the insightful results were reflected in the anecdotal data. We were struck in the first lesson we taught with the reaction of those people to passages that we classically consider difficult, in particular the Isaiah passages. We also tend to struggle with some of the symbolic elements in the scriptures, and again we found that those people resonated to these concepts in a way that I personally have not seen in our Wasatch front culture. Let me first of all present several incidents we witnessed, and then attempt to analyze our experiences. When we taught the Isaiah lesson we were surprised that two of the women in our teacher's group wept uncontrollably. They were overcome with the power of those passages. I marveled at this because I had never seen it before and it was exactly contrary to what I would have predicted. When we observed the teachers teach, we saw the same thing. One student had difficulty reading because her voice was choked with emotion as she understood the scriptures for the first time; and again she was reading Isaiah passages. We sat in on another class where the teacher and the students wept openly and unashamedly. One mother told us that she had taught the Isaiah lesson to her children who were seven and nine years old, and that they had the same emotional reaction.

We saw similar reactions with the lesson on symbols. Before I went down to join Sandi in Mexico City, I met with everyone I felt could give me help in putting these lessons together. A colleague in the English Department had spent a considerable amount of time working out the idea that the Book of Mormon should be read as a figural narrative and that everything in the Book of Mormon could be tied back to Lehi's vision. I was excited by the power of this idea and decided to teach it in Mexico. Almost as soon as I got off the plane I tried to tell Sandi about the exciting new lesson I had brought with me. She interrupted and said, "Let me tell you what's happening first." She talked about a humble peasant woman who had been assigned by her bishop to read Lehi's vision and study it carefully. She had done this; it was the only part of the Book of Mormon that she had read with any comprehension. In every lesson that Sandi had given, this woman commented, "Why that ties back to Lehi's vision. That's just like . . ." and she would go on and explain. I marveled again that something that a professor at Brigham Young University had struggled with had come so easily and naturally to a marginally educated woman.

The lesson on Isaiah and the lesson on symbols were two lessons that were accepted with greater ease of understanding than we could possibly have anticipated. I have pondered this since I have been back and in discussions with some of my friends and colleagues have posited the following explanations. The symbols and the figurative language used

in the scriptures have an eternal verity that has not been dulled in the minds of those people by acquaintance with more superficial symbols; by humanistic approaches to ethics, literature, and religion; and by the habit of conceptualizing instead of experiencing gospel truths. These assertions are compatible with observations made there and here. The more educated the women there, the less their emotional responses to the lessons. These same lessons were taught to a BYU Book of Mormon class, and the responses were consistently more abstract and less precise than the post-test responses from the Mexican group. Of course, there are many possible explanations for these differences, and a more thorough analysis could be a major research effort.

Whatever the reason, it is apparent that in a culture where people are trying constantly to lose weight, and often drink Fresca and Coke instead of clear water, the filling and satisfying images of the bread and the fountain of living waters do not seem to carry the impact they carry with people who do not know from one day to the next whether or not they will have enough to eat. To people who have to send their children with donkeys to the water tank every morning for the water that will be used by the household that day, the image of cool, refreshing water gushing forth in a barren desert struck home. When Isaiah talks about feeding in high places, and mountains being exalted, and the Savior leading his children by fountains of clear, living water, the response is not intellectual, it is real and heartfelt. When they read the passage "Awake and arise from the dust, oh, Jerusalem, and put on thy beautiful garments, oh daughter of Zion," women who do not own beautiful clothes recalled vividly what it was like to put on a beautiful garment, an experience they had perhaps only once or twice in a lifetime. Again, the message struck home.

It did not take a very perceptive observer to see the scales of darkness literally fall from their minds, to see their eyes light up with a depth of understanding not witnessed by this observer before in an American culture and to sense their hunger for these life-giving, meaningful insights. This hunger was exemplified by one woman who had been in the church for eleven years but had never been able to understand the Book of Mormon. After the lessons she carried her Book of Mormon with her everywhere, even on the bus, looking up every cross reference she could find on the Holy Ghost.

These people experienced what they read. Their reading skills were deficient but their sensitivities and their experiences with life were not. Given meaningful content which spoke directly to such sensitivities and experiences these people were rather quickly moved to what we consider high levels of comprehension.