The United States continues to admit to its shores a population of immigrants and refugees who differ significantly from past immigrant groups in that they come from societies where the use of written language is either non-existent or negligible at best. This class of immigrants presents a special challenge to adult education programs which have the responsibility for providing them with second language education, particularly in the area of reading instruction.

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

It is important that educators have a clear understanding and appreciation of what the educational background of these immigrants/refugees (hereafter I/Rs) has been in order that they may have some empathy for the plight of these people in their attempts to fathom not only a new and strange educational system, but the mysteries of print as well. Moreover, there is need for an understanding of how very different their education has been from that with which most educators are familiar. Unless there is a clear understanding of the kind and quality of education these I/Rs have had the chance exists for a misinterpretation of the attitudes and behaviors these I/Rs bring with them when they enroll in adult education programs in countries like the United States. In addition, there is the danger that educators may be unjustly and unfairly led to believe that these I/Rs are somehow
lacking in intelligence.

LINGUISTIC ASPECTS

Addressing the linguistic aspects of this unique educational problem first, it would be well to take cognizance of the fact that there are an estimated five to six thousand languages spoken in the world today. The figure is far from precise; some estimates go as high as 7,000, others much lower. The truth of the matter is that our knowledge of linguistic typology is such that we simply do not know the exact number of languages in existence. A second not too well-known fact is that many of these several thousand languages do not have a written form, or if they do, there is very little of consequence written in them. Edmonson points out how relatively few languages are or have been written: "Aside from the literatures of the past, those of the present may be said to include approximately 78 different languages so that we may place the number of literary languages of history at just over an even 100 (106)." (1971:323)

The languages that most educators are conversant with all have writing systems which have been in existence and use for many years. Examples include the well-known European languages: French, German, English, Dutch, Polish, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Swedish, Finnish, Danish, Norwegian, Czechoslovakian, Turkish, Greek, Rumanian, Bulgarian, Yugoslavian—to name most of them. Note that the total is a mere 18 languages. In addition, there are the languages of Asia and Southeast Asia including the many Chinese languages, all written with the same chirographic system, and Japanese, Korean, Thai, Burmese, Malaysian,
Indonesian, Tagalog, etc.

Another feature about these well-known languages with long established writing systems which merits consideration is that the cultures in which these written languages are used all share some of the same features although they may differ widely in others. Consequently, a visitor to any one of these cultures will observe print being used in much the same way that it is at home, i.e., on street signs, newspapers and magazines, labels on goods, signs in windows, libraries with books and magazines in them, stores with price tags on the merchandise, labels in shirt collars, restaurants with menus, and all the innumerable ways in which print is used in cultures where literacy is not only firmly established but highly prized as well.

Contrast the situation of a typical literate culture with that of a culture where the environment is not only devoid of common instances of written language but may, as a matter of fact, have none. It is just such print impoverished cultures that are the source of the I/Rs who are the subject of this paper. These people are often totally ignorant of the many different ways in which print is commonly used if, indeed, they are not ignorant of the very basic functions of print. Even if the language of an I/R has had an orthography constructed for it, it does not follow that all members of the population who speak the language are privy to the orthographic system. In fact, there may be but a privileged few who know how to read or are even aware that their language possesses a written form.

Ong describes such cultures as follows:

Fully literate persons can only with great difficulty
imagine what a primary oral culture is like, that is, a culture with no knowledge whatsoever of writing or even of the possibility of writing. Try to imagine a culture where no one has ever 'looked up' anything. In a primary oral culture, the expression 'to look up something' is an empty phrase: it would have no conceivable meaning. Without writing, words as such have no visual presence, even when the objects they represent are visual. They are sounds. You might 'call' them back—'recall' them. But there is nowhere to 'look' for them. They have no focus and no trace (a visual metaphor, showing dependency on writing), not even a trajectory. They are occurrences, events. (1982:31)

SCHOOLING

Learning literacy skills implies some kind of schooling whether that schooling begins informally at home or takes place in a more disciplined and ordered way at school. Thus, it is important for educators to know something of the kind of schooling, if any, these I/Rs have had prior to their arrival in their new home. What does schooling mean in their native cultures? Does it mean a building with a headmaster or principal, with teachers who have undergone a specific kind of training, and classrooms with a teacher's desk at one end in front of a blackboard, with chairs or seats for the students? Does a bell ring to start classes and dismiss them? Or, conversely, does schooling mean sitting at the feet of an elder with eyes open and mouth shut drinking in whatever it is that one is endeavoring to learn? Does schooling mean learning together in small groups, or does it mean learning by oneself? Unless a teacher has had a first-hand opportunity of observing carefully how schooling transpires in different cultural settings (and how many have?) it is not an easy task to come to a full appreciation of what schooling means in cultures other than one's own. A
nagging question is by what means are adult education teachers able to make themselves knowledgeable about the cultural and educational backgrounds of their students? While useful information about other cultures may in fact be available, it is often buried in academic writings which may not be readily accessible to teachers in adult education programs.

If a person is accustomed to learning primarily by quiet observation, and if any other type of learning behavior strikes him as bizarre, then it is expecting a great deal for such an individual to conduct himself according to the mores of educational practice in classrooms such as those commonly found in the United States where the entire learning ambience is foreign, and the rules of the learning game are no longer meaningful. Trying to learn something as exotic as reading in such an alien environment can be the stuff of which culture shock is born.

COGNITIVE CONSIDERATIONS

When teaching individuals who come from widely different cultural backgrounds, the teacher cannot assume on the basis of the lack of any kind of formal schooling that the individual is cognitively deficient just because the schooling which the individual has had differs vastly from that which the teacher has personally experienced. The only reasonable conclusion to be drawn from such a set of circumstances is that the I/R is cognitively different. An I/R may possess a highly developed cognitive network, rich in skills of great utility in his home culture which may be of relatively little use in learning something as foreign as reading. A case in point is the
remarkable cognitive skills possessed by certain navigators in that part of the Pacific known as Micronesia. These navigators who have never attended navigation school command extraordinary skills unknown to the best-trained navigators schooled in other traditions.

Academically trained navigators stand in awe of the navigational knowledge of these Micronesians, knowledge which enables them to navigate over thousands of miles of open ocean without access to a compass, sextant, or map and somehow know precisely where they are as they sail their small craft in the waters of the Pacific. (For an account of these navigators see Lewis 1974, 1976.)

From the perspective of the affective domain, it is important for educators to recognize that individuals like these navigators who are highly prized and respected in their home cultures have suddenly been relegated to a position of very low status by virtue of their presence in an alien culture where their skills are unknown, one where being literate is the norm rather than the exception.

TYPES OF ILLITERACY

In order that we might further appreciate what a difficult position these Ll illiterates find themselves in, it may be instructive to compare them with other Ll illiterates who originate from cultures where written language does exist to some extent. While this second group of illiterates may not be able to read in their mother tongues, certain aspects of literacy are probably known to them. Therefore, they have some insights as to
what print is and what it is used for, although their knowledge of the functions of print may be strictly limited. Some may have received a little schooling, and learned perhaps how to write their names and thus are not total strangers to the concepts of the functions of print. This rudimentary knowledge of written language can be exploited when teaching these I/Rs to read and write. But if I/Rs lack this basic knowledge about print, it is not difficult to imagine what a task it must be for them to comprehend that a language can exist in a form other than speech. Thus, these adults are not unlike children who have not yet learned to talk about language in the abstract, i.e., they are able to speak their native language fluently, but have not yet developed a metalanguage which enables them to talk about words, sentences, nouns, verbs and the like.

Still another group it might be useful to compare our I/R Ll illiterates to is those Ll speakers who are taught in English from their first day of school even though they live in areas where English, or some other world language, is only used to any significant degree in schools and government offices. Such are the conditions which obtain in places like Tahiti where the language of school, government, commerce, etc., is French; the various islands of Micronesia, Fiji, American Samoa, and similar places where the language of instruction is English. There are many such locales in other parts of the world as well--Africa, for example. For a specific example, consider the fact that until very recently the children in Ponape in the Federated States of Micronesia, were to be taught exclusively in English beginning in kindergarten. (Whether they really learned anything
of substance as the result of being taught in a tongue they did not understand is another issue and will not be addressed here other than to note that concerned teachers in Ponape often ignored official policy and taught the children in their Ll. Moreover, it is easy to criticize policies that require children who are living on very small islands to be taught in a tongue which they will use, for the most part, only in school situations or perhaps occasionally in transactions with people from other islands who speak languages which they do not understand, or even more rarely with English speakers from various parts of the world.)

Even though these Ponapean children receive the greater part of their formal education in a language other than their native one, they live in what I choose to call a "comfortable" environment. The moment recess is announced, the children revert to their native language—the language with which they are the most comfortable. On the way home from school at the end of the school day, the language used is the Ll. Once the children reach home, again the Ll is the language of communication. Thus, children can (and do) develop a kind of tolerance to being taught in a language which is not their mother tongue knowing that once school is over, a more comfortable linguistic ambience awaits them.

Contrast the foregoing situation with the plight of the illiterate adult I/R who finds himself in an alien culture where nobody speaks his language save for the members of his immediate family and any other I/Rs from his homeland who happen to reside
While the three groups of people just discussed share certain common problems from a second language learning perspective, the I/R population is by far in the most stressful situation because its members have so much to learn in order to be successful in their new home and must often undergo this learning under less than optimum time parameters. A complicating factor is that fairly large numbers of such I/Rs are mature adults of perhaps age forty, or beyond. Any adult learning a second language goes through a stressful period because of the inability to say anything of substance in the second tongue while at the same time being capable of talking at great length on a variety of subjects in the L1. However, if a person is studying an L2 in a school situation in his home environment any stress engendered by his schooling evaporates once the bell rings ending class and he moves back into his own cultural/linguistic milieu. The I/R, on the other hand, remains in an alien cultural/linguistic environment, except for his immediate home environment, in school as well as out.

The children of I/Rs are destined to have English become their dominant language even though they will, in all probability, continue to speak their native language with parents, siblings, relatives, and other speakers of their L1. Because there is little or nothing to read in their native language—a situation which was also true in their native environment—there will be nothing for them to read and study from in their L1, and as a consequence they will not have the
opportunity to grow and mature in the use of their native language in the same way that they will in English. In fact, if the children are young enough when they arrive in a country like the United States, they may eventually speak little or none of their native language although they may come to understand it quite well.

From the discussion thus far it is apparent that the teacher of adult L1 I/Rs must be sensitive to the problems that such learners face not only in learning to cope with a second language, but the very real problems which arise when these people meet, for the first time, something as totally foreign to them as schooling of the type practiced in countries such as the United States.

READING INSTRUCTION – L1 ILLITERATES

We turn now to the teaching of reading to L1 illiterate I/Rs. The basic question syllabus designers must address is the one which asks what such individuals have to be able to read in order to function in their new society. A second decision concerns the most advantageous time to introduce reading in the L2 curriculum. For adults learning an L2 who are already literate in their L1, the question of when to introduce reading is a totally different matter, and common sense suggests that the earlier these individuals can begin reading in the L2 the better because reading can provide enormous amounts of comprehensible input (Krashen 1982:9) for them to build on.

Recognizing the fact that many of the I/Rs have little or possibly no formal schooling, that most of them have been raised
in rural agricultural settings, and that they are adults, it is unrealistic to assume that they are going to become proficient enough in literary skills to read much beyond what is called environmental reading. In a perfect world I/Rs might be expected to achieve literacy skills which would enable them to read newspapers, novels, a variety of magazines, etc., but pragmatically speaking, this is not going to happen except in the rarest of cases. As a matter of fact, all literate people are limited in one way or another in what they can and do read. Few of us without appropriate training can read the law with anything approaching full comprehension, and yet we do not feel any the lesser for it. From a curriculum design standpoint, we need to take a very practical look at the most pressing reading needs of these I/R students before adopting a pedagogy and curriculum to teach whatever it is we have elected to teach.

WHAT TO TEACH

Is it, for example, educationally justifiable to teach an adult to read the labels on cans of food, street signs, simple directions, notes which their children carry home from school, prices of goods, and a few other items and not carry their reading instruction any further? Is it incumbent upon educators to bring such adults up to a level of reading that will enable them to read newspapers, or at least part of them, for example, the want ads? Consider the fact that there is limited time available for teaching the L2 to these I/Rs. Consider also that it takes a considerable measure of time just to equip these people with the basic elements of the spoken language. All of these factors suggest that our aspirations concerning literacy
training must be realistic. Thus, it may be that for very practical reasons only sufficient time exists to provide instruction in but the most rudimentary of reading skills—a type of reading we might well call memorization reading. If, in reality, memorization reading is all that an individual really needs given his or her individual circumstances, then there is no necessity to feel that educators have failed in any sense in their instructional program if nothing more is accomplished.

Time is truly a crucial variable in the education of I/R adults. Most such adults are normally engaged in some kind of work and can devote but little time to academic pursuits so that by the time that the usual class in adult education begins, it is often the case that the students are already fatigued from having put in a full day's work.

A related factor—and one which is directly related to time—is that of study and homework, two concepts which by definition are foreign to many I/Rs. Is it reasonable to expect that these people are suddenly going to develop "good study habits" when they have never engaged in anything remotely akin to academic study? In short, we can expect progress in reading and other language skills to accrue but slowly in light of the factors already noted.

SETTING GOALS

Setting lofty, unobtainable pedagogical goals can only lead to disappointment and frustration on the part of both students and teachers. The immediate needs of the students must dictate the curriculum rather than some idealistic plan concocted by
educational planners. An example of materials which in my opinion contribute little towards helping people learn to read environmental English is the series of Hmong folk tales published by Macalester College. This series of tales has been translated from Hmong into English. The little booklets are nicely illustrated and are printed in both Hmong and English. At first blush, one might be tempted to think that these are very useful for initial literacy teaching. But are they? Presumably the adult Hmong all know the folk tales in their original oral form. Moreover, the adults can be expected to pass these tales onto their children, again in oral form. The Hmong children will learn English as their written language and only English: peer pressure will not be denied especially in language learning. The parents, for the most part, don't read Hmong and this handful of little folk tales will not make them truly literate in their own language. Hmong will never have a written literature of any consequence, so what is the point of these booklets? The Hmong were not literate in their homeland, why is it necessary for them to become literate in their L1 in a country where the predominate language is English?

A very strong argument can be made for initiating reading instruction in the L1 before starting it in the L2, but in the case of the Hmong there is so pathetically little available in print it hardly seems worth the effort. If there were teachers who could speak Hmong, then the Hmong children as well as the adults, could be taught to read in Hmong first using the language experience approach, but such teachers are not readily available.

Setting the case of the children aside, there is little
point in teaching the Hmong to read in their L1 either in the
United States, or probably, in their home country for the plain
and simple reason that their life style is not one that includes
literacy as a necessary component. Reading a certain amount of
English in the United States is crucial for these adults, but
given their age and work commitments we unfortunately are going
to have to settle for something far less than what might be
called well-rounded literacy in English for these people. That
their children can and should become fully literate in their
second language (English) is something we can hope and strive
for.

ACHIEVEMENTS IN LITERACY

Overall literacy teaching hasn't been an overwhelming
success throughout the world. The January 27th issue of the
Times Educational Supplement contains a short article by Anne
Goodyear in which she points out that the Government of France is
now quite concerned because a recent inter-ministerial commission
convened to study the problem of illiteracy in that country found
that only 25 percent of the French people can read easily in
their own language, 60 percent read with difficulty, and as many
as 15 percent are totally illiterate. Thus, it is estimated that
there are some 8,000,000 illiterates in France (Goodyear
1984:18). The record of the United States is at least as dismal.
According to the widely quoted report by the National Commission
on Excellence in Education of April 1983 (known more popularly by
its title, A NATION AT RISK), "some 23 million American adults
are functionally illiterate by the simplest tests of everyday
reading, writing, and comprehension" and "about 13 percent of all 17-year-olds in the United States can be considered functionally illiterate. Functional illiteracy among minority youth may run as high as 40 percent."

In summary, the immediate L1 reading needs of a unique L2 population such as the Hmong must be predicated on a careful analysis of who the Hmong are, where they came from, what their life style was in their native environment especially with reference to their system of education and style of learning, and the status of literacy--if any--in their place of origin. A reading pedagogy for these I/Rs cannot be based on some kind of dewey-eyed idealism if the best interests of these people are to be served and if they are to successful in achieving the basic concepts and uses of literacy necessary for them to make a reasonably comfortable adjustment to their new environment.
REFERENCES


