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What does resource-challenged mean according to educators and educational researchers? A review of the literature relevant to textbooks and education media in Madagascar

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Abstract

The goals of this paper are 1) to attempt to deepen our understanding of the notions already in use in conceptual frameworks of resources and resource-challenges in textbooks and educational media, especially as they have been applied in Madagascar; and 2) to emphasize the need for educational researchers and educators in this area to form our own context-specific definitions of "educational resources" and "resource challenges" before we make recommendations for improved practice and policy concerning textbooks and educational media.

The first part of the review introduces the work presented at the 2005 Dakar TESOL Symposium on English Language Teaching in Resource Challenged Contexts. The second part synthesizes the diverse views of

resource challenges and resource opportunities of leading experts in the field writing about Madagascar. Our conclusions highlight the multiple educational media-related insights and solutions to resource issues discussed in the available literature and point to the need to rethink and revise our existing conceptual frameworks for analyzing the nature and roles of textbooks and educational media in the Malagasy context as well as those of other countries.

Introduction

Researchers, educators and other professionals in the field of education have problematized the counter-productive influence of defining individuals, groups and schooling circumstances in negative terms, by what they lack rather than what they offer or portend to offer. Consider how these terms have changed in educational research and literature: disabled, limited English proficient, third world. In 2005, the national TESOL organization (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages), sparked an internal debate among participants at its Dakar Symposium on *English Language Teaching in Resource-Challenged Contexts*. Informally, participants debated, how helpful was it to define sub-Saharan African contexts as resource-challenged or resource-poor? And what did these terms mean exactly for English language teaching or education in general?

With no clear definition of the concept of resource poor or resource challenge in the educational literature and research, we perpetuate an ambiguity and misconception that has potentially negative consequences for education actors on the ground. The influence of these problematic notions is exaggerated when such language becomes part of the internal discourse in education reform and education policy. Resources (human and material) may be perceived as valid only if they come from outside. Materials are adopted or adapted but rarely created and developed internally. The limitations and dependency characteristic of this situation impacts material developers, teacher trainers, teachers and students who do not have a sense of ownership, mastery, and connection with their textbooks and educational media.

Madagascar is an illustrative example of this problematic. Textbooks, educational media, and educational resources in general are key to the ongoing reform of the education sector, begun in 2003 with the national plan to meet "Education for All" goals and as outlined in the Madagascar Action Plan (MAP) 2007-2012. The MAP is the official statement of development goals for the country. Education is one of the primary "commitment[s]" of the Plan.

At all levels, from primary to tertiary, developing appropriate curricula, textbooks, distance education and other educational media are explicit strategies to reach the "educational transformation" proposed by the state (Government of Madagascar, 2007). Yet neither the current status of materials and textbooks nor a description of appropriate and relevant resources is defined in official government documents.

In light of this issue and others faced by education professionals in the sub-Saharan African region, IARTEM invited educational researchers, ministerial officials, teachers and teacher trainers to participate in its first conference in Africa in October, 2008. The aim of the mini-conference in Antananarivo, Madagascar was to increase contact between countries in Africa and IARTEM in the field of textbooks and educational media. The theme of the mini-conference was "Understanding and improving the role of textbooks and educational media in a resource-challenged environment." Invited participants submitted papers and presentations that addressed the conference theme or sub-themes:

• How can textbooks and educational media be used effectively in African learning contexts?
• How can materials designed for well-resourced developed countries be adapted for use in a resource-poor environment?
• In what ways do textbooks and educational media help improve students' performance in the classroom?
• The importance of quality, evaluation and selection of textbooks and educational media.

This brief literature review and analysis was initially presented at the Madagascar conference under the first sub-theme. Its goals are 1) to attempt to deepen our understanding of the notions already in use in conceptual frameworks of resources and resource-challenges, especially as they have been applied in Madagascar; and 2) to emphasize the need for educational researchers and educators in this area to form our own context-specific definitions of "educational resources" and "resource challenges" before we make recommendations for improved practice and policy concerning textbooks and educational media.

The first part of the review introduces the work presented at the 2005 Dakar TESOL Symposium on English Language Teaching in Resource Challenged Contexts, the catalyst for our review of the literature relevant to Madagascar. The second part synthesizes the diverse views of resource challenges and resource opportunities of leading experts in the field writing about Madagascar. Our conclusions highlight the multiple educational media-related insights and solutions to resource issues discussed in the available literature and point to the need to rethink and

revise our existing conceptual frameworks for analyzing the nature and roles of textbooks and educational media in the Malagasy context as well as those of other countries.

English language teaching in resource challenged contexts - December 2005

The 2005 TESOL symposium in Dakar aimed to provide an opportunity for English language teaching professionals in Sub-Saharan Africa to learn from and interact with leading experts in the field and their colleagues in the region. Three invited speakers shared their work and research on ELT in resource-challenged contexts with the goal of helping participants develop insights and skills. While TESOL descriptions (http://www.tesol.org/s_tesol/sec_document.asp?CID=23&DID=2945#overview) identified common challenges as "coping with overcrowded classrooms, managing with a lack of resources, and designing appropriate and relevant materials," participants and presenters were left to define what "lack of resources" and "resource opportunities" meant in the sub-Saharan context(s).

The three key speakers at the conference took slightly different perspectives on the resource issue as it relates to ELT. Jodi Crandall, Director of the doctoral program in language, literacy, and culture at the University of Maryland in Baltimore County, addressed the limitations implied by the conference theme in her paper, "Resource-challenged? Yes. Under-resourced? Not really."

Pai Obanya, an international education strategist based in Abidjan, Nigeria, proposed a more critical look at the issue in his work, "A Comprehensive Searchlight on Resource Constraints in TESOL Contexts in Africa." And Brain Tomlinson, Head of the Post-Graduate, Research and Consultancy Team in the School of Languages at Leeds Metropolitan University, focused on the teacher as education resource in his paper, "The resourceful English teacher." Together, an analysis of the different but related key terms the authors use to describe resources and resource challenges reinforce the need for a context-specificity in our discussions of factors relevant to understanding textbooks and educational media in sub-Saharan Africa.

Crandall, for instance, uses four terms relevant to instructional resources: 1) "limited instructional resources," 2) "important resources," 3) "available resources," and 4) "minimal resources." Of these three terms, only "limited instructional resources" is not explained or defined. According to Crandall, important resources in the teaching of ESL include teachers and learners. Available resources in resource-challenged contexts are most often

coursebooks, blackboards and notebooks, and as she notes, these are the items that are most often considered as lacking in 'resource-poor' settings. In contrast to these more familiar resources, she encourages the consideration of the less-often-thought-about "minimal resources" available in contexts characterized as resource-challenged: local culture, authentic stories and experiences, personal journals, conversation partners and clubs, and pictures (pp. 8-11). In addition, she notes that learners and their thoughts , experiences, writing, offer the best resources for language learning even when print, audio, video based resources are also available.

Similarly, Obanya took on the notion of resource constraints. In a more critical and political analysis of the contexts of ELT in sub-Saharan Africa, however, he discusses two related terms: 1) "tangible resources" and 2) "not-quite-tangible resources" (p. 15). What he calls "tangible resources" are those we usually consider in our estimation of well-resourced or resource-poor. Tangible resources, according to Obanya, are teaching and learning materials, school finances, teachers and classrooms. More enlightening for a deeper consideration of resource issues is his description of the sociolinguistic dynamic, educational policies and practices, and the wider socio-political conditions that are all considered "not-quite-tangible resources" for teaching and learning (p. 15).

Taking a more limited focus on one specific educational resource, the teacher, Tomlinson did not take on directly the definition of a resource challenge in English language teaching. He instead developed the concept of the "good language teacher" and "effective practice" (pp. 28-30) as the two main resources available to teachers without access to the more familiar "available" and "tangible" resources described by Crandall and Obanya. His approach to resources and resource-challenges focuses on a humanistic vision of the teacher and exploitation of locally available materials. Enthusiasm, commitment, concern, and creativity are available humanistic resources even when schools are not "well-resourced." Although Tomlinson does not define "well-resourced," he encourages the teacher to find ways of exploiting locally available materials: language in use, access to reading materials and home – made materials (folktales, stories), or experiences in spoken English (jokes, poems, songs).

Importantly these different ways of looking at resources in education, in this case English language education, move us beyond the simple availability and unavailability of textbooks and other familiar media in our ideas of what is a resource and what is a resource challenge. This is an important step in our rethinking and reframing of textbooks and educational media as the main resources in the sub-Saharan context and

provides a useful framework for our analysis of the case of educational resources, texts and media in Madagascar.

Diverse interpretations of educational resources and resource challenges

IARTEM's conference in Madagascar in October, 2008 gave us an opportunity to revisit the theme of the 2005 TESOL conference and explore this problematic in the case of Madagascar's resources relevant to textbooks and educational media. We posed the question, what do educational resources and resource challenges mean in Malagasy educational contexts? A review of academic research, technical development reports, official government publications and the unpublished papers presented at the IARTEM conference provide diverse and thought-provoking responses to this question.

A 2000 MLA Project Report by the Human Sciences Research Council measured the availability of learning materials in Madagascar, as well as 10 other sub-Saharan countries (Botswana, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Morocco, Niger, Senegal, Tunisia, Uganda and Zambia). The report defined teaching resources as teachers' guides and chalkboards. It measured learning materials in terms of "chalk, teacher-made wall charts, learner-made wall charts, learning aids from the environment, and exercise books for learners" (p.59). Evaluators noted that Madagascar received the lowest ranking on the Learning Materials Index measurement: "Teachers from all countries besides Madagascar indicated that there is adequate availability of such materials" (p. 59). In terms of the availability of teacher's guides, as measured on the Teacher Resource Index, on the other hand, Madagascar ranked in middle with a mean of 1.4, compared to Senegal with a mean of 0.5 and Mali with 2.7 on a scale of 4.0.

In equally familiar terms, but from a different orientation, the World Bank Africa Region Human Development Sector's *Report on Education and Training in Madagascar* (2001) defined "external and domestic" resources (p. XX). External resources to education, not surprisingly, were limited to financing. Teachers, libraries, laboratories and computers comprised domestic resources.

A less traditional and more insightful consideration of educational resources came from a chapter describing the adult education sector in Madagascar sponsored by the German Adult Education Center (2000). The Malagasy authors acknowledged the under-development of the adult educations sector in Madagascar. Although it was never directly stated,

the authors alluded to the relative absence of materials and educational media: "Madagascar peasants have limited access to information and full-participation in national education debates. Consequently, the rural population has to rely solely on other people for…information…" (p. 88). In addition to "other people," the authors also identified "migratory movements, meetings in marketplaces, centers of worship, traditional ceremonies" as the most important educational resources for adults in Madagascar (p. 89). It is worth noting how we rarely consider these particular and productive learning resources in our discussion and analyses of educational media in Madagascar or elsewhere.

Context specific resource-challenges and resource-solutions

Most of the Malagasy education experts participating in the IARTEM conference in Madagascar focused on textbooks as the primary education resource. They also opted to expand on the issue of resource challenges rather than resource solutions. Table 1 summarizes the perspectives presented during the conference.

The analysis, synthesis and summary of perspectives offered at the conference shows relatively limited concepts of what is a resource and a resource challenge, in particular as they may or may not be relevant to Madagascar. Out of the 18 presentations given at the conference, 14 focused exclusively on textbooks. All but two of the Malagasy participants focused on the textbook, exclusive of other media. Most of these were oriented toward proposing solutions to adapting textbooks for the Malagasy context (Saula, 2008; Raholiarisoa, 2008). Rakotovao and Rasoaznamino both described the lack of textbooks available to the social science and English language teacher, respectively. In addition both promoted not only regional "teacher resource centers" as resource solutions to this problem, but also the training, teamwork and networking necessary to maximize the efficacy of this resource.

Many Malagasy presenters cited the lack of training in resource use, adaptation and creation as a resource challenge, even in settings where textbooks, media and other educational resources are available. Raholiarisoa (2008), for example, explained how not only the lack of training but the bias for external experts created a resource crisis for teacher training at the primary level. In Madagascar, where large commitments of human and financial resources are being devoted to education reform in the context of Education for All (EFA, *Education Pour tous/EPT*), foreign experts are invited to lead local teacher training, curriculum and material development teams. The result then is a resource challenge, when inappropriate textbooks and other media are produced.

Resource	Resource challenge	Resource solution	Author
Textbook	Textbook configuration, role and relation to digital and other media		Selander
Textbook, materials	Materials irrelevant to sociocultural diversity, marginalization, disadvantage	Alternative or complement to TB	Rodriguez
Textbook, media		Various ways of expressing masculinities and femininities	Knudsen
Textbooks, materials	Lack of materials, support to rural teachers, inability to develop own materials	Online training, self-developed materials	Krishnamurty
Web	Globalization, English domination, poverty, no control of info accessed		Randriamasitiana
Textbooks, training	Lack of training in material use, euro-centered books, irrelevant themes, no time or training to adapt, untrained teachers	Self-help centers, local production of textbooks	Paulette
Textbooks	TB designed for other contexts	Using APC to adapt	Saula
Curriculum, print material for teacher training	No locally developed T materials, no training to adapt create, bias against local expertise	Local adaptation and production	Raholiarisoa
Textbooks,	Lack of textbooks in	Teacher	Rakotovao

instructional material	History, Geography and Civic Ed	resource centers	
Textbook	Teacher lack of training to maximize textbooks in Eastern Madagascar		Rasoazanamino
Textbook	Student lack of experience with textbooks, damaged books		Rasoarivelo
Textbook	No system for quality textbooks in local languages	Self-production and publishing	Horsley
Textbook			Aamotsbakken
Textbook			Gim
Research			Lorentzen and Aamotsbakken
Textbook			Asukile
Textbook			Lund
Textbook	Lack of textbooks	Textbooks	Rabe
Concepts of education resources	Limited definition of education resources	Case specific definitions	Clemons and Ravelonanahary

Table 1. Madagascar 2008 - Definition of resources, resource challenges and resource solutions

When we consider the unique views of the Malagasy conference participants relevant to resources and resource challenges, we can see the construction of a unique framework for understanding education resources, textbooks and education media in Madagascar. One of the most interesting questions emerging from the Malagasy perspective of their own education resources is the challenge of having resources that one does not know how to manage. Some argued this challenge is an issue of teacher training (Rakotovao, 2008; Rasoazanamino, 2008; Saula, 2008); while, others felt it was an issue of socio-political values in favor of non-local human and material resources (Raholiarisoa, 2008; Randriamasitiana, 2008).

Conclusions

In sum, the lack or lack of access to textbooks and educational media was accepted as a given by the Malagasy participants. As a part of the educational reality in the country, the issue was rarely discussed explicitly. We heard only a few participants state directly, "we have no books" or "schools have no electricity." The foundation of the Malagasy framework should then not only include the presence and absence of textbooks and media, but the access to what does exist, and the values and mechanisms that control how textbooks, educational media, and other resources contribute to educational development and system reform in the country.

Because Madagascar, as well as many other countries, struggles with a relative lack of textbooks and other familiar educational media, they are considered resource-poor or resource-challenged in academic research, technical development reports and government documents by both international (external) and national (internal) evaluators and researchers. Yet from the above analysis of various perspectives on resources and resource challenges relevant to textbooks and educational media, we may understand some of the many challenges to productive changes at the policy and practice level. In the context of a global textbook and educational media market, as researchers and educators, we should be sensitive to how textbooks and educational media affect economic, political, and social development in countries worldwide. In Sub-Saharan Africa, a region with tremendous linguistic, cultural and economic diversity, educators, students, policy makers, and media developers face common challenges including overcrowded classrooms, lack of resources, and inappropriate and irrelevant materials, but we also believe understanding local and regional interpretations of resources in education presents an opportunity for thinking "outside of the box" when it comes to improving the availability, use, and impact of textbooks and other educational media.

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