

Going back to school - Reading Ura



Ukarumpa, Papua New Guinea – Written by Peggy Rosensteel with Tim Scott

The language of choice is always Ura. However, many adult Uramät Bainings learned to read and write in Tok Pisin or English because this is what is taught in the schools in the Gazelle Peninsula of East New Britain, where they live.

Can a person automatically read a book because it is written in their own language? Not without a little practice and some incentive! This is where “Transfer Literacy” comes in – learning to read in the vernacular by reading short heart-language phrases or sentences. The students begin by using only the familiar letters from English or Tok Pisin and then add the letters that are unique to their language.

Adult Transfer Literacy was enthusiastically initiated by a group of Uramät Baining people who were auditioning as “actors” for the dubbing of the Luke video in Ura. For the approximately 15 people in Gaulim village who wanted to play the part of John or Peter, studying their “script” was their first experience with reading more than a few sentences in their mother tongue. After trying the lines a few times, they discovered it was fun!

From that group, a Literacy Committee was formed. The first Transfer Literacy Workshop was held last year followed by a second one in July of this year. The participants liked reading aloud Ura legends and Bible passages and learning Ura spelling and grammar systems. They enjoyed the spontaneous “acting out” of a valued traditional story as the writer read it. But mostly, they liked laughing at the many funny stories they wrote and read to each other.

Monika Ngari, a grandmother who attended and brought others to both workshops said, “We started having an Ura reading and writing time as part of our family worship every week. We want to learn to read and write in Ura so we can teach our children. It’s important that our children retain understanding of their own language and culture.”