

# The Reconstruction of the Observation Survey in Other Languages

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The contributions of Marie Clay in emergent literacy are widely known. One of her great contributions lies with the development of *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (2002). Through the Observation Survey, educators in English-speaking communities have been able to systematically observe children engaged in reading and writing acts, thus enabling them to make informed teaching decisions as children are learning to read and write.

In 1989, Clay published an article about one of the survey tasks, "Concepts about Print in English and Other Languages." In it she described the interest shown in the Concepts About Print task by researchers from other countries and their findings when it was redeveloped in Spanish, Walpiri (an Australian Aboriginal language), and Hebrew; there had even been a redevelopment in Braille. She was careful to point out that each new language required more than a mere translation, and this position has been borne out by subsequent experiences with the French and Spanish reconstruction of the entire Observation Survey.

## Why Reconstruct the Observation Survey in Other Languages?

Interested individuals in many non-English speaking countries have



*The French reconstruction of the Observation Survey began in 1995. The published version is shown here.*

inquired how they might introduce Reading Recovery in their respective countries and languages. The response has always been that it is a slow process and must always be preceded by the redevelopment of the Observation Survey. This is an essential first step and one which can stand on its own since the end product is a valuable instrument for teachers of young children whether or not Reading Recovery is available.

The reconstruction of the Observation Survey in other languages requires that the instrument fit the linguistic and cultural context and be sensitive to the literacy developments

that children need to master in each language. The conceptual premise of each Observation Survey task, however, must be retained. Furthermore, the four alternative stories needed to administer the Concepts About Print task must also be adapted. All reconstruction efforts must incorporate a team approach. This includes experts in Reading Recovery as well as teachers and researchers involved with children's early literacy in the respective languages. Once each reconstructed task has been completed, they must be subjected to validity and reliability measures. In addition, each observation task must also be subjected to rigorous field trials to establish nor-

mative scoring standards. To date, the Spanish and French reconstructions of the Observation Survey have undergone this process.

## Reconstructions of the Observation Survey in Other Languages

### *The First Reconstruction: Spanish*

In 1988, bilingual educators from Tucson, Arizona initiated the process of reconstructing the Spanish version of the Observation Survey, published as *Instrumento de Observación de los Logros de la Lecto-Escritura Inicial*. Soon after, bilingual educators trained in Reading Recovery joined the effort and the Descubriendo la Lectura Collaborative was formed.

With guidance from Marie Clay, the observation tasks as well as Reading Recovery procedures were reconstructed and implemented in Spanish. Since Spanish bilingual students in the United States are also exposed to English literacy, information about how to account for English responses was incorporated into the scoring and analysis of each task.

Concurrent construct and content validity of the six observation tasks of *Instrumento de Observación* were established in 1992. To establish concurrent validity, the six observation tasks were compared to the Aprenda norm-referenced Spanish Reading Achievement Test. Construct validity was established by comparing each Spanish observation task to each other. Content validity was established by subjecting the six observation tasks to back translations. Content validity for the full Spanish translation was established in 1999. A standard

Spanish dialect was used in the full Spanish edition to ensure its acceptance and use in any Spanish-speaking community.

### *French*

The French reconstruction of the survey began in 1995. At that time, a plan was conceived in collaboration with Marie Clay. At first the Nova Scotia Department of Education carried out a simple translation of *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement*. However, the need to undertake additional adaptations in order to reflect the differences between English and French soon became evident. With the initial phase of reconstructing the survey in French completed, its developers conducted validation and norming research. These studies were carried out in 2000–2001 under the auspices of the Canadian Institute of Reading Recovery. Canadian Heritage, an agency of the Canadian government, was a key partner in the project. The analysis of the data and the resulting report were completed during the following year. The French reconstruction of the survey is known as *Le Sondage d'observation en lecture-écriture*.

### *Current Reconstructions*

Funds from the European Commission have made it possible to form the Early Literacy Assessment Project that includes Denmark, Ireland, Spain, Slovakia, and the United Kingdom. Pilot versions of the survey in Danish, Irish, Slovak, and Spanish<sup>1</sup> are planned for the end of 2003. Again, those involved with this project have come to realize that the task of recon-



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structing the Observation Survey tasks in different languages involves more than just translation; each observation task must be appropriate linguistically, culturally, and educationally.

What is fascinating is that children's experience with early literacy varies in each of these countries. Each country approaches the task of teaching young children to read and write in a different way. In two countries, the United Kingdom and Ireland, children enter school before they are 5 years old; in two countries, Spain and Slovakia, they enter school at age 6, and in Denmark at age 7. Two of the languages, Spanish and Slovak, are orthographically quite regular; two, English

<sup>1</sup> The Spanish reconstruction will include changes from the newest edition of *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement*.

and Danish, are much less regular. Irish (or Gaelic, a heritage language) seems to occupy a mid-point in terms of orthographic transparency. The Gaelic context is particularly interesting as it is a second language for most Irish children because they are being educated in Irish-medium schools outside Gaeltacht (native Irish-speaking areas).

### The Challenges of Reconstruction

The interaction of the different languages and different education systems has produced unforeseen challenges to the task of reconstructing *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement*. It forces those involved to confront their own understandings and to work out what they perceive as

key principles behind each task. Each project has provided opportunities to compare children's literacy development according to the orthographic complexity of the language and the age at which they encounter formal literacy teaching. It has also provided an ideal situation in which to consider different expectations of children on entry to school and the challenges imposed on them in different countries.

Fortunately, those involved with each project have been able to draw directly upon the experience and knowledge of Marie Clay and other Reading Recovery trainers for guidance and assistance in making the Observation Survey available to school systems internationally.

### References

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