

“THIS IS SO EASY!”

Pelagia Mendoza's heart froze when she received Collota as her first teaching assignment. Collota is a village very high in the Andes Mountains--a village once well known as a den of horse thieves and cattle rustlers.

In fear and trepidation she walked the two hours from her home, higher and higher along the ancient Incan trail of mud-carved stairs and steep rocky inclines. There she began teaching in a cold, dirt-floored classroom where a cracked layer of cement over the mud wall served as a blackboard. Attendance was poor and Ms. Mendoza, a Conchucos Quechua speaker, wondered how students would ever progress. She taught in Spanish as she was instructed to do, but knew the students were not understanding.

In looking for solutions, Ms. Mendoza learned about an SIL team who was promoting literacy in Conchucos Quechua. “I didn’t know you could read and understand at the same time. This is so easy!” she exclaimed after learning to read Quechua.

The SIL team had developed teaching materials in Quechua and Ms. Mendoza took them back to her classroom and began teaching her students in Quechua. Some parents objected since they thought Spanish, not Quechua, was the key to progress. But Ms. Mendoza convinced them that learning is the key. Once the children learn to read in Quechua, she bridges over into Spanish so that by the time they complete fourth grade, they are ready to learn completely in Spanish.

Although a naturally shy woman, Ms. Mendoza felt driven to help children avoid the difficulties she experienced in school. Lives are transformed not only in Collota, but also in surrounding villages, where she has trained teachers to teach in Quechua. She has also taught nearly all the adults in Collota to read. Therefore, this year’s adult class had only eight students.



In 2003, Ms. Mendoza had 40 students in grades one through four, plus she supervised the kindergarten class of 12 students. Six students graduated in December 2003. One student from the very first class she taught has been accepted to university in Lima. This is the first person from Collota to go to university.

The whole town is excited about what Ms. Mendoza has done to help them. It is a different community now, no longer full of horse thieves and cattle rustlers. The people understand that reading and education help them live better and happier lives. They are working hard to improve their crops, encourage their children to do well in school, and maintain their rights as citizens of Peru.

“Reading in Quechua makes them feel like people. It gives them value and they know they are as good as everyone else,” says Pelagia Mendoza.

In Living Languages in Peru, p. 92.