
How literacy can harm Scripture Use¹

by Margaret Hill

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Traveling to different countries in Africa, I've noticed one important link between Scripture use and literacy, and that is how literacy can harm Scripture use! It is clear that it is right and proper to have an emphasis on teaching people to read, but the big question is: Where do you start?

It has been shown over and over again that to initiate a literacy program by teaching non-literates to read is a mistake. The best starting place is with those already literate in another language. Following the top-down-versus-bottom-up sociological principle, it seems that if the educated influential people of a language group are the ones to get involved at the beginning of a project, then later there is no problem in arousing motivation for reading in the mother tongue among non-literates. On the other hand, if the first people involved in reading the mother tongue are poorly educated, non-influential people, it is highly unlikely that educated people will be interested later. Top down works, bottom up does not!

Some years ago one translator told me that the newly printed New Testament was being used only by those who had finished the basic literacy classes. She went on to say that they knew they made a big mistake in the early years. When they first arrived in the area, they saw the poor, non-literate Christian as needing the Scriptures the most, so they concentrated on them. As a result the church leaders in that language group always saw the Scriptures as something for only poor village people.

When a translation project begins, one of the most important early Scripture use tools is a transition guide. These books are generally popular, even with university graduates. Most people need this type of push to get into their own language, whether by attending a class or by going through the book individually. Most important, the booklet must have an adequate amount of exercises and not only explanations about the language. Besides this guide, books in the language that people actually want to read are needed.

Traditionally teams have often begun by printing a collection of folk stories. This is useful in many ways and may be popular, but might not in fact give great motivation for educated people to read their own language. One obvious way of discovering what people want to read is to ask. In the Ngbaka literature program of the northwest Democratic Republic of Congo, the

¹ This article is a revision of: Hill, Margaret. 2003. "Scripture Impact and Literacy." *Scripture in Use Today* 7:8-10.

most popular books with the intelligentsia (including numbers of university graduates, doctors, etc.) are:

- History of the Ngbaka people—long and detailed with quotes from early Belgian documents
- Local medicinal plants' details with method of preparation and dosage
- Ngbaka proverbs side by side with Biblical proverbs
- Politics—explaining major political systems of the world, with no mention of Congo!
- Hymn book
- The Bible, especially the Psalms

Every area will be different, and needs and interests change as the country changes around them.

This then is an alert for those planning programmes, and helping others with strategies. How people begin a literacy programme will have a real impact on the later use of the translated Scriptures.