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## Literacy can still hurt Scripture engagement... *but there is good news too!*

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*“Increasingly here in Africa we are seeing that many language groups are very interested in using their languages orally, but very uninterested in reading or writing in them...”*

I wrote an article a few years ago about the problems that initial literacy programmes can cause Scripture Engagement,<sup>1</sup> and I am still seeing this problem continuing.

A group of languages was recently offered a very nice new program that would help them make primers for beginners to start reading their own language. A good idea? Well, maybe not. Language X had only just had an orthography established and as yet very few of the already literate people had been exposed to this orthography. Now a literacy programme was starting in that language to teach beginners to read, those who had never learnt to read and write before. What are the people who are already literate likely to think? Almost surely that mother tongue books and Scriptures were meant for the poor, the “uneducated”, those who cannot read or write....

This is not to minimise the value of people learning to read, but studies of the dynamics of change show us that certain people in every population are the ones who bring about change. They may be the networkers, the innovators or the ones seen as having information, but on average it is most likely they will be literate, having spent many years at school. If language groups are to take an interest in the written form of their language, Bible translation agencies must begin with influential people who are already literate. This includes, for example, the church pastors. For them, a *transition guide* is what is needed, helping them move from the language they were educated in (the official language or the language of wider communication), to being able to read and write in their own language.

***Certain people in every population are the ones who bring about change.***

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Hill, “How Literacy can harm Scripture Use.” Scripture Engagement website, 2009.  
<http://www.scripture-engagement.org/content/how-literacy-can-harm-scripture-use>

But what if people are just not interested? Increasingly here in Africa we are seeing that many language groups are very interested in using their languages orally, but very uninterested in reading or writing in them. Even if some people do want to read the language, writing it is another matter, particularly if the orthography is difficult and/or very different from the national language.

This even seems to be true with quite large language groups. My colleague, John Ommani, speaks Luhya which is a major Kenyan language. He reports that in his home church back in the village no-one at all reads or writes Luhya, and his family are the only ones using a Luhya Bible when he returns to the village. However, the language is alive and well orally. People may be interested in learning to read, but particularly in the case of younger people, they want to learn to read English or Swahili.

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Only two factors seem to make groups interested in the written form: (1) The group may feel the need for political or sociolinguistic reasons to make a clear distinction between their group and the dominant language group in the country or area. Wars can bring about this type of sentiment. This may result in a strong desire to read and write their language, and even reject a larger language. There are examples of this in Sudan. (2) Secondly in a Christianized area, use of the mother tongue Scriptures over a period of years by all or nearly all the churches in the area definitely makes a difference. An example of this is Acholi, spoken in Northern Uganda which is well used in the Anglican, Catholic and Orthodox churches, and as a result a good proportion of the population reads and writes Acholi.

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Bible translation agencies are working in many groups in Africa and beyond where neither of these conditions applies, and literacy programmes may feel like hitting your head against a wall! In these cases shouldn't we be refocusing our strategies instead of expecting that literacy programmes will somehow be one of the most effective ways to bring the Scriptures to people?

Today we are in a very different position from when Bible agencies and churches first started running literacy classes. There *are* alternatives! We now have many methods of producing, distributing and copying oral Scriptures of many different types. In almost every case where a

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literacy programme is going nowhere, people will accept oral Scriptures and listen to them. Sometimes literacy programmes then grow out of the oral product. This is rather like “See the movie, read the book”.

Is it time to speed up the evolution already happening as we move more into digital audio and audiovisual media for mobile devices? We will probably always need at least a few fluent readers in any language group to produce the oral media, though as time goes on there are more and more other ways of getting Scriptures recorded such as the prompting approach, or translation using videos.

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