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## There's More to Reading than Meets the Eye

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When I was young my father did not let me ride a bicycle. He thought it was too dangerous so I never did. Later in life I have ridden a bicycle a few times – well, tried to. I can get on, turn the pedals, move along. Am I a cyclist? Most people seeing me in action would answer 'No', as they watch me wiggle and shake on a bike! I don't ride in a straight line, I panic when there is a downhill slope, I tremble when a car approaches. But give me a big open area, where there is not a hazard in sight and I can ride! Maybe I *am* a cyclist?

We can ask the same questions of a reader – who can we call a literate person? What skills does a person have to have before he or she is deemed 'literate'?

One thing that makes it difficult to have a cut and dried definition of a literate person is that 'literate' presents itself along a continuum. Let's call it the 'Literacy Line'. Over time a reader walks that 'Literacy Line'.

### The Literacy Line

At the start of the line there's the recognizing and decoding of printed symbols. And that's what the new student learns, how to crack the secret code – that each symbol represents a sound and that we can join the symbols to make a word. At this stage the eye is working hard, the brain is working hard – concentrating on each symbol, saying each sound. Is that student now literate? Well, yes - but no! At this level so much time is spent working out the code that there is little brain power left to think about the meaning. It's a bit like the bicycle – I am trying so hard to balance and to keep the pedals moving that I can't steer!

After more practice the reader moves along the 'Literacy Line': through the stage of reading signs or labels and moving along the line to reading phrases and then to stories about things they have already experienced. Perhaps a story about going to the garden; there's already the knowledge of taro, yam, cabbage in the garden, all of which helps with expectations about what will be on the printed page. By this stage we would expect an increase in comprehension of meaning though still limited to registering facts rather than making too many conclusions from what is read. Literate? 'Yes', but 'no' in that the readers' skills are still limited to familiar subjects and their comprehension level too remains limited. If they come across a new challenge – like me going down a steep hill on the bicycle, they will fall off!!

Eventually though, the reader does get to the point of fluency where little thought is given to the process – like turning the pedals on a bicycle without even thinking. Comprehension level would be expected to be much greater since less thought is given to the process of reading and more can be given to content. At this point we can confidently deem the person literate, but I want to suggest there's still further to go, particularly when it comes to reading the Bible.

## **Biblical Literacy**

On the upper end of the Literacy line, there is a range of literate-ness that one enters by gaining another set of skills which are involved in reading more difficult texts. The reading of academic writings requires particular skills, as does reading the Bible.

Thorndike (1917) described reading as “a very elaborate procedure involving a weighing of each of many elements in a sentence, their organization in the proper relation one to another, the selection of their connotations and the rejection of others, and the cooperation of many forces to produce the final response.”<sup>1</sup>

This definition contains some at least of what we would desire for the Biblically literate. When we are considering Literacy programs with a view to Bible reading, or Scripture Use programs with a view to the reader engaging with the text, internalising it, thinking with the author (which would surely be our goal), we must be aware of Thorndike's phrase “a very elaborate procedure.”

Indeed it is an elaborate procedure for which many skills are required.

Such things as the ability to analyse a text; to question why the author wrote what is there, how the smaller parts are linked to the whole, looking for language signals of linking words, ‘buts’, ‘therefores’ etc.

There are inferencing skills needed, determining: Why did the characters do what they did? What are they feeling? What are the implications of this?

Furthermore the reader must be equipped with the skills to evaluate and make a decision on what is read.

We want the Bible reader to do a lot more than decode the text and read it at a superficial level if our purpose is for God to speak through His Word to His audience in a particular language and for the reader to respond in life changing ways.

It should be noted too that all these skills are highly desirable, if not mandatory for a mother tongue Bible translator who needs excellent source language interpretation skills.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward L. Thorndike - *Reading as Reasoning: A study of mistakes in paragraph reading (1971)*

I would like to suggest that these higher level literacy skills are not automatically part of a reader's ability. If the readers have acquired their reading skills through a largely 'rote-learning' style, with much emphasis on sight words, the higher level thinking, questioning, analytical skills are not generally well developed.

As teachers however, we often tend to neglect these important skills and just assume they are part of every reader. For many readers who have come through a Western-style education programme, these skills have been developed from a young age so that the reading adult is most likely equipped (though may need encouragement to do so) to apply them to reading and understanding the Bible.

For those for whom this is not the case, specific reading activities must be included in a literacy or Scripture Use program to move the reader further along the literacy line to get to the point needed for Biblical literacy. The teacher tends to expend much energy in developing basic, even fluent reading skills - but the teacher must not stop there!

Often too, much energy is expended in providing an attractive product, but to provide a glossy covered, colour-plate filled book of Luke's gospel will not achieve the results of the recipient gaining a deep understanding of Luke's message, unless these academic, or analytical literacy skills are present and applied. Going back to our bicycle analogy, it would be like giving me a fancy painted, many-gear bicycle thinking that would help me become an accomplished mountain bike competitor. Yes, Literacy and Scripture Use must be more than distributing the printed text.

Of course there are many other skills which are needed to produce good Bible readers such as: reading columns, skimming the text, reading foot notes, using a glossary and so on – all of which must be part of training the potential 'user' of Scripture.

## **How can the reader be trained?**

Let us take the case of an adult reader. My experience has taught me that it is not a quick process to move an adult reader along that last part of the Literacy line if these analytical skills have never been part of their learning experience.

The reader must be provided with frequent exercises, starting with basic comprehension questions (to teach that a written text is meant to be questioned and understood), to more complex reading and writing exercises which force the reader to make deductions, conclusions, and generally apply much thought to the text. This can be done with Scripture or non-Scripture texts (see appendix for examples).

However by far the easiest way to develop Biblical literate adults is to start the training at childhood! Pre-schools, primers, elementary readers for example should incorporate questioning, analytical skills so that this becomes a normal part of the reader's approach to a

text as he or she becomes an adult reader. If the pre-schooler is asked to consider what has been read to him, he will develop a questioning approach to texts he will read for himself.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that I have only touched the surface but it is obvious that literacy is a skill in progress – from the initial basic decoding skills, to the eventual acquisition of higher level thinking skills which are particularly needed for reading the Scripture with understanding.

Part of the role of the Literacy teacher or the Scripture Use promoter must be to develop these Bible reading skills.

There is more to reading the words on the page than meet the eye. In order for the Bible to be read with comprehension and understanding, resulting in an appropriate response to God's communication, the reader must be equipped with the skills to analyse, evaluate and assimilate the information.

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## Appendix – Developing higher literacy skills

When seeking to develop the higher level Literacy skills of a reader, the teacher should firstly assess the starting level of the reader.

It is most likely that basic comprehension skills will need to be developed so exercises should be given to help the reader learn to determine facts from a given passage. If this has not been part of a reader's education, much practice is needed to get the reader to answer from the text itself.

This in itself can be graded by the difficulty and length of the passage. For a newer literate, stories of familiar content are best, gradually working up to reading narrative Bible passages, and eventually non-narrative Bible texts.

Writing also assists with the overall thinking process involved in literacy and some written exercises are suggested below. However if writing is particularly tedious to the student, the focus can remain on reading, and exercises involving minimal writing can be given. Oral question and answers may also be helpful to develop the reader's ability to ascertain facts and later their implications.

Once the reader has become proficient in gaining the facts from a text, practice at 'using the facts' should be given – considering the characters' feelings, determining the author's intent, recognizing implied meaning, making summary statements, drawing conclusions etc.

Below are just a few of many possible exercises to assist a reader.

### Examples of Exercises which would accompany a written text

#### *Exercises in getting the facts*

- Comprehension questions
  - i. **Here** - the information for the answer is provided obviously in the text
  - ii. **Hidden** - the answer must be worked out from what is provided in the text
  - iii. **Head** - the answer is deduced, using the knowledge gained in the 'here' and 'hidden' questions
- True and false sentences about a story
- Identifying characters, places, events
- Drawing a picture about a story

- Maths story problems
- Joining two halves of sentences from a story

### *Skills to move further along the Literacy Line*

- Follow written instructions – e.g. draw a picture, carry out an action, etc.
- Tell a story from a sequence of pictures.
- Put story in correct sequence.
- Choose the correct ‘main point’ or ‘summary statement’ of a paragraph.
- Underline key words, phrases.
- Describe a picture – what is important to mention if someone isn’t looking at the picture?
- Describe an animal, person or object for someone to guess (riddle).
- Write or tell steps to make something.
- Discuss the possible consequences from looking at a picture.
- Compare and contrast pictures or objects.
- Use a newspaper article to work out what info. is there, what is not (Does it tell us...?)
- Advertisements – what information can we get from it?
- Write a story as a group – each adding to the last person’s – discuss how you would have had a different twist.
- Write letters.
- Write a questionnaire to find out information.