
How To Know When Scripture Use Is Succeeding¹

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Recently I was asked to give two Scripture Use (SU) case studies: one positive, the other negative. As I began to reflect on various projects, I found this to be more difficult than I had initially imagined. What criteria would I use to make this evaluation? That the translation team felt optimistic about the project? Subjective. A story of someone blessed by using the Scripture? Anecdotal. Information from the church where the translators attend? Too local. Besides a generalized sense of success or failure, I had no clear criteria by which to evaluate programs, and very little concrete data on the actual state of affairs.

How do we define SU success? What are we aiming at? To report on one positive and one negative SU case study was difficult because our SU goals for projects are vague, we lack tools to measure progress towards those goals, and we don't commit resources to carry out evaluation of our projects. Further talks about SU strategy cannot move forward without factual data on where we stand in relation to the goals. Twenty years after the term *Scripture in Use* was coined, I think we should move beyond anecdotes, subjective impressions, or discussions in the air, uninformed by facts. How can we know how to alter our route if we don't know where we're going?

In Côte d'Ivoire and Mali, after experiencing SU strategy discussion fatigue in which the same issues were raised over and over, I decided to make some initial efforts to find out the status of SU in the twelve projects in those countries with published New Testaments. With limited time to commit to the endeavor, I simply sent a questionnaire² to the translation teams and supplemented it with further questions to be answered when possible. I was able to gather rough data on ten of the twelve projects. Although the results need further verification, they were pleasantly surprising: in contrast to the gloomy discussions about SU at our conferences, I found that in all but two projects, the New Testaments were in use by at least a certain segment of the population. Of course, we would like use to increase, but this initial evaluation turned around my vague negative impression of SU in the country and informed me about what things worked in our particular socio-cultural setting. It also established a baseline for future evaluations.

I expected that by asking around in the larger world of our mission, I'd find others who had developed more specific SU goals and tools for measuring progress in language projects. I was

¹ This article is a revision of: Hill, Harriet. 2000. 'How to Know When Scripture Use is Succeeding', *Notes on Sociolinguistics* 5 (2):81-87.

² See Appendix A for the questionnaire used.

unpleasantly surprised to find very little developed. Not only do we not know about the state of Scripture use in our projects, we often don't even know how many New Testaments or Bibles have been sold.

Goals

Each project and country is unique, calling for a custom-designed set of goals. I've put together this list of generic goals as an example. It serves only as a point of departure to stimulate thinking about particular projects and entity strategy. The concepts are drawn from the existing literature on SU assessment, especially the Bolivia report, David Landin's research, and the Dyes' writings. Work in Muslim contexts would call for a significantly different set of goals.

I propose both national level and project level goals. Neither can succeed without the other. Both call for the investment of resources.

National Level SU Goals

1. To encourage the development of a language policy in each church or mission.

Rationale: Many churches haven't addressed the issue of language, and yet it's key to communication. Encouraging reflection on language policy will help focus on the role of language in the church.

2. To assure that an interconfessional organization exists to discuss on-going translation and literacy issues in the country.

Rationale: The mission might form such an organization(s) (or forum), or assure that an already existing organization can provide a channel for discussing translation and literacy in the churches. It is important that this happen at the national level as well as within each project; national church leaders need to be in dialogue with each other at the highest levels to pave the way for language use and the local committees' work.

3. Appropriate training is available to meet needs for on-going translation and SU.

Rationale: Without up-grading the team's skills and offering encouragement, SU, literacy and on-going translation will most likely lose steam.

4. To share the vision for Bible translation and literacy with church leadership.

Rationale: In addition to training national translators, the local church leadership needs to catch the vision for the importance of Bible translation and literacy, so they support the work.

Project Level SU Goals

We can consider the SU task finished successfully when:

1. The majority of church leaders know how to read the vernacular language and/or encourage others to do so.

Rationale: Not all church leaders in an area are from the language group; it would be great if they learned the language and how to read it, but minimally they can encourage others to do so.

2. Church leaders use the existing translated Scriptures in situations where formerly they translated orally from a language of wider communication (LWC).

Rationale: If this goal is not met, we cannot say that we have succeeded in SU. We must admit that there are situations where a LWC is necessary and good.

3. At least two domains of vernacular Scripture use are established in the life of the church.

Rationale: Without a domain appropriated for vernacular Scripture use, it will not be used.

Comment: Will there be goals for both rural (monolingual) and urban (multilingual) contexts?

4. Church leaders are equipped to teach the laity how to study the Bible and apply it to their daily lives.

Rationale: Many Christians have learned to subsist with very little input from Scripture. New patterns need to be learned. We need to assure that some means for accomplishing this are present in the context. At times this will mean we get involved in giving basic training to church leaders.

5. At least two local organizations are publishing documents in the vernacular.

Rationale: The language must be productive, or people will turn to other languages that are.

6. A local organization is actively running the literacy program.

Rationale: Literacy needs continual input and emphasis or it will devolve.

7. A system for literature distribution through local institutions is functioning.

Rationale: It's hard for people to use literature if they can't get copies of it. A big problem!

8. A local committee takes responsibility for any continuing translation work, with the mission functioning as consultants and trainers.

Rationale: Often in the past, the translation team has been the “motor” for initial translation, and works day to day in the project. For on-going translation, the initiative must come more and more from the local committee.

9. The church has been given adequate opportunity to develop their own hymnody.

Rationale: We can’t force churches to use traditional tunes, but we can give them exposure to the possibility and see if they bite the bait.

10. Funding is in the hands of either the local community or other organizations.

Rationale: Funding is essential for programs; without a financial base, the work will stop.

Measuring Progress and Evaluation

Progress towards some of these goals will be obvious and require no special process. Either a national organization exists or it doesn’t. Either a local organization is publishing literature in the language or not. For other goals, assessment is more complex and will require an investment of time and energy.

Measuring progress must be carried out sensitively, not to declare one team successful and another a failure, but to inform ourselves of challenges and successes. Each project is different, some more challenging than others. Even with the best of SU strategies, some fields are not ripe, and we can only wait on God to act in the hearts of the people, all the while doing all we can. There are no easy or foolproof answers.

Who? Measuring progress must be done in collaboration with the translation team, but it can’t be done well only by the team. “Surveyors” external to the project provide expertise, a resource of ideas, objectivity, and a consistency that would allow projects to be evaluated by similar or comparable standards. When each team evaluates its own work, the evaluation is less reliable because it is likely to reflect the optimism or pessimism of the team. As is true for any consultant, SU consultants need to come alongside a team, work with them, and help them do their job better.

Where? In the same way that surveyors can’t visit every village, SU surveyors can’t visit every church. Still, in large language groups, SU evaluation needs to span the entire area and all of the churches or groups that are potential Scripture users. Without rigor in the SU evaluation, results will most likely reflect a limited geographic locale and the churches most familiar to the translation team.

How? Anecdotes are wonderful for providing encouragement. They’re memorable and interesting. They don’t, however, provide a good basis for strategy. We need to know the overall patterns of SU, not the exceptional stories. This can only be assessed by survey: what percentage of the lay leaders has passed a reading test? How many Bible studies have taken place here this year? How many lay leaders are considered qualified to lead SU workshops in

their communities? Each situation will define these values differently, but only that definition can then measure progress. As goals are set, planners need to establish values for measuring progress.

Keeping track of Scripture sales would appear to be a rather simple nut to crack. Surprisingly, this too needs special attention. A system needs to be set in place, and accountability required.

How frequently? The plant doesn't need to be pulled up by the roots daily, but some rhythm of SU evaluation needs to be established. If SU is on a regular conference agenda, it would be good to have an evaluation of progress-to-date in hand, on which discussions can be based.

At what point does an entity/mission sever relationships with a language community? The changes involved in bringing a community into reading and Bible study are massive and take time. Monitoring progress, giving input, and providing occasional stimulus to SU over the years might be a very wise use of resources, allowing maximization on the investment personnel made in the initial years of translation work. SU and literacy are dynamic, not static. Some situations look encouraging, and then later get stuck and need new input. Until an entity can pass on the tracking of language projects to a local organization, the job is not finished, even (and especially) after personnel assigned to the project leave.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that one role of SU consultants would be to help teams establish specific, appropriate SU goals and then to survey progress towards those goals at regular intervals. If we agree that the *use* of translated Scriptures is our goal, and not simply translated Scripture, the evaluation of progress must reflect this development of the vision.

Appendix A: SU questionnaire for evaluating *New Testament* use in Côte d'Ivoire and Mali—1997

Sales

1. How many copies of the NT were printed? (first printing, second printing)
2. How many copies were sold at the dedication?
3. How many copies were sold since the dedication? (on consignment doesn't count as sold)
4. How is the NT marketed?
5. How does the language community know that the translation has been done and where a person could buy a copy?

Use

1. Which denominations are using mother-tongue Scripture in their services?
2. What percentage of lay leaders knows how to read mother-tongue Scriptures adequately?
3. What indications do you have that mother-tongue Scripture is being used in homes? in Bible studies? In Bible schools? Other?
4. Is anyone actively promoting the New Testament and literacy?

Literacy Program

1. Was/Is your literacy program aimed at French literates or non-literates?
2. What percentage of the language community learned how to read the mother tongue?
3. What is the present state of the literacy program?
4. Is publication continuing in the language?
5. How many literacy teachers are currently teaching classes?
6. How many literacy classes are currently taking place?

Personal Evaluation and Comments

1. Do you feel encouraged or discouraged by the use of the New Testament?
2. What did you do that worked well, that you'd like to pass on to others?
3. Are there any things you did that you consider mistakes, which you could warn others about?
4. What other advice do you have for those who follow?