Supporting oral-preference learners to engage well with printed Scriptures

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The majority of the world's population lives in cultures that are largely oral communicators. Oral strategies for reaching people with the gospel in these cultures are proving effective and need to be a part of every church's ministry to their own congregation as well as those outside it. However, churches can also provide support, or scaffolding, for those in oral cultures who desire to learn literacy skills. As a scaffold provides support and access to a building under construction, so using oral strategies can assist those learning to read and write. Such techniques help to associate literate practice more closely to oral communication.

1. Introduction

People in oral cultures communicate in ways that are different from print-oriented cultures. Instead of communication and learning taking place from books, web sites and instruction manuals, oral learners prefer face-to-face interactions, mnemonic devices that aid memorization and dramatization to bring lessons into vivid colour. Oral communication is every bit as complex as print-oriented strategies; each is unique but the differences can be bridged through the use of parallel strategies.

According to Jim and Janet Stahl (2007), a language-rich environment increases brain growth among young children. Washington (2006) asserts that storytelling helps to build vocabulary and the ability to predict. Shah (2015) notes that stories can instill virtues, make people aware of their own culture, broaden their world view and help the listener to deal with difficult situations through the experiences of others. Benefits are not just limited to children; adults who have not grown up with storytelling can also benefit from its inclusion in the curriculum.

People in oral cultures function well in these modes of communication and many prefer to continue to do so; but at the same time, print media is increasingly pervasive, even in remote villages. Governments and an increasing number of parents are keen for children to become educated; advertizing is plastered in towns and roadsides, and the internet is becoming more accessible. As Doll notes, "Many societies have a desire for literacy even though their communication preference is oral. They value literacy even though they practice orality" (2015:71). Some communities see literacy skills as a specialist role; that is, while not everyone needs to be literate, a few literates can meet the community's needs.

So where does the church stand in this oral-literate continuum? The Scriptures are fundamentally a written media, but for the average church member the church service is largely an oral-aural experience. Churches and organizations are also using many of the newer oral communication tools for discipleship and evangelism, such as video and radio. Is there still a way that churches can provide literacy instruction toward meeting a felt need of church leaders for personal connection with the

Bible and also a felt need of community members for functional literacy? Indeed, churches are doing it in many communities around the world.

But how can oral communicators be introduced into the world of literacy? One approach that literacy teachers can use is scaffolded instruction. This paper will examine ways that literacy learners from oral cultures can be supported in their reading and writing skill development by using oral communication tools.

2. Orality – its strengths and appeal

Oral communicators excel in areas where literate cultures are weak. They tend to be more relational; many memorize histories and poetry and lineages with ease; they are masters of art forms such as songs, proverbs, poetry, and drama. Stories are the preferred tool of the oral communicator for learning, remembering, conveying and receiving information Repetition and mnemonic devises aid them in their learning. (Madinger 2013:15)

In the church setting, many of these oral features are present. For example, the leader speaks directly to people; music enhances worship; people join together to sing and often to pray aloud together; there are memorized parts, such as the Lord's Prayer; and in the context of small group studies there is a negotiation of meaning[1] when discussing the Scriptures. People enjoy fellowship around the actual church service and are strengthened in their faith because of the commonality of the experience.

Even in churches in literate cultures such as in the West, many of these same features are present. The experience of 'church' is largely an oral one, with a few literate practices interspersed, such as Scripture readings or singing from common sources, either book or screen. In fact, many churches are in a post-literate stage, where the place of print media is minimized and oral communication abounds.

Many oral communication tools have been developed to assist the Church and believers in their Christian walk, such as the craft of telling Bible stories; Bible study materials; videos; and art forms such as songs, dance, drama, illustrations and the creation of realia (for example, the wordless book and symbolic objects – the cross, dove, and the like). For many people, these tools have opened their eyes and hearts to the truths of the Scriptures and led them to faith in Christ.

3. Scaffolding literacy for oral cultures

Still for many people, a basic understanding of the Scriptures gained through oral means has led to a growing desire to read more for themselves. For others, there is the awareness that literacy skills will open new opportunities and knowledge for them, such as for earning more income or being better able to care for one's family or for solving problems in one's life such as writing letters to children far away and knowing how to treat illnesses. Often functional literacy tasks involve using a language of wider communication. Oral communicators desire literacy skills for a variety of utilitarian purposes.

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[1] This term is used by James Cummins to denote how people learn in a second language context. The concept means that participants can come to an understanding of text through discussing the meaning in a group along with non-verbal cues.

For these learners, the concept of scaffolding instruction is worth exploring. Walqui[2] (2007:204) explains how scaffolding is linked to the Vygotskyan theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). According to Vygotsky (1978), the basis for all learning is social interaction. The ZPD is that area between the present knowledge of the person and the extent of the person's potential understanding when assisted through dialogue with another. This dialogue might be in any of the following forms of assistance: from a more skilled person, from a discussion with peers, from assisting a less skilled person, or from internalized practices or strategies and self-talk (e.g., memory, experience, or prior knowledge) (Walqui:208).

Just as one places temporary supports around a building when doing construction (scaffolds), so too the literacy learner can be supported in the process of gaining new skills and understandings. The scaffolds are useful in moving the learner from the known (oral communication) to the limits of the person's potential ability – through the ZPD. The scaffolds may be temporary or long-term structures and the skillful teacher will use them as long as they are effective.

Shrag (2013) has written helpfully on ways that learners can move from the known (for example, traditional art, dance, poetry) to the unknown world of print media. Oral cultures are places of social engagement where growth occurs through interactions. By engaging the right community members in creating texts which are in keeping with known art forms, the learning will be greatly enhanced.

Walqui suggests that the first task of the teacher is to focus the student on key processes and ideas. One such process is a cyclical view of learning rather than a linear approach. In a cyclical curriculum, concepts are reintroduced but at a higher level of complexity. Perfection is not the aim at each point in the process because the concept will be returned to and elaborated on numerous times. An example of this approach is a 'whole language' reading approach where learners are exposed to stories, and the practice of reading them is an approximation of the task; independent mastery of each element is a progression of steps.

Another way that learners are prepared for the reading task is by showing learners how they learn. Strategies may seem obvious, but by overtly preparing the learner – by showing them patterns, by preparing them for ambiguity and by offering them the support system of group work – they become more confident in trying new things. An example of this preparation is showing learners how lessons follow a set routine and how key pictures give clues to the symbol-sound correlation, and by grouping learners who can work together to negotiate texts and their meanings.

Walqui (2007:209-213) lists six types of instructional scaffolding:

Modeling – Learners need to be given clear examples of what is expected of them. In many parts of the world, learning to read equals learning a prestige language which is not familiar to them or may be equated to sounding out words without meaning (Wendell 1982:8-10). Literacy teachers and church leaders can model meaningful reading by reading to learners in a clear, expressive, and well-paced manner. When reading is done fluently in a familiar language, the text will generally be meaningful.

When teaching writing, literacy teachers can show examples of different types of texts that they have produced, such as letters, poems, and stories. Self-expression in print will take time to develop. The teacher can note how writing is used in the community and can model those uses, for example, for making lists, posting notices, and remembering important information. However, caution should be used not to impose foreign standards of writing. Since writing is a new mode of communication for

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[2] Walqui's article applies the concept of scaffolding to English language learners in the secondary classroom; the basic concepts are adapted in this paper for literacy learners from oral cultures.

people from oral cultures, learners may need to negotiate what 'good' writing actually means to them.

Bridging – Learners must be able to link new learning to something they already know. The literacy teacher does this by activating prior knowledge. Literacy learners from oral cultures already have a wealth of information and memorized texts on which to draw. In addition, using the words from familiar songs, riddles or poems in written materials will create a smoother transition. Familiar content draws learners into print media. It speaks to the heart level.

Shrag suggests that "Performance provides content for teaching reading" (2013:221). When learners begin by acting out something that has happened, the teacher can then draw words and phrases from the performance to use as a reading lesson. The words of songs can also be written down and used as texts. I know of at least one person who learned to read primarily by singing familiar songs while the leader pointed to the printed words.

Prior knowledge can also be called on when approaching a new written text or concept. For example, the class may talk about the topic of a story and the teacher can introduce the key concepts before opening to the first page. This can provide a personal link between the text and the learner. Where Bible storying has taken place, these previously learned stories can form the bridge material, utilizing the same pictures and key words. Another way to provide a bridge between oral and written text would be to produce experience stories based on shared experiences of the learners.

Contextualising – When written text is removed from the here-and-now, many of the oral communication props are removed. The text becomes out of context. To add context to written material, the literacy teacher can introduce real objects or pictures pertaining to the text. Another way to add context is to pose real questions, i.e., open-ended questions that relate to the learners' present felt needs, for the learners to grapple with in groups. For example, math lessons can be enhanced through the use of realia, health lessons can be enhanced by discussions of what they have done in a similar situation, and stories can be enhanced by clear, cultural illustrations.

Schema-building – "Schema, or clusters of meaning that are interconnected…" help the learner to organize what they are learning (Walqui:212). It weaves new information into what they already know. This can be done by giving a Big Picture look at what the reading to follow will cover, by providing an outline, or by helping the learner to compare something they already know to what they will be reading about. The learner needs to be able to work both top down (Big Picture to detail) and bottom up (detail to conclusions or summary). For oral learners, this might entail the teacher telling the highlights of a story before the learners attempt to read it.

A fun way to introduce the alphabet/sound system to learners is through the use of an alphabet song that includes locally recognized objects (for example, b is for babuy/pig). Using rhymes or poetry to focus on the sounds of the lesson would also be interesting in cultures where poetry is enjoyed. For oral learners, comparing and contrasting what they know to what they will read about will aid them in fitting new ideas into what they have experienced (for example, contrasting daily life in a rural setting to what they know of city life if that is the theme of the reading text).

Re-presenting text – Another scaffold for the literacy learner involves the learner in transforming text into different formats. For example, illustrating a text will give visual clues to how a text is perceived. And if the learners have read a story about going to school, then they might transform that same text into a song or drama or dialogue. By changing the genre, learners again connect print media with their own oral communication styles. Another way to use this scaffold is by having

learners transform one form of print media into another, for example, transforming a narrative into a letter to a family member.

In addition to supportive methods for oral learners, supportive materials can also be developed. People respond well to traditional stories, proverbs, and riddles when presented in both oral and written form. These texts are often the first ones developed for the beginning reader (Shrag 2013:221).

Developing metacognition – Finally, the literacy teacher can assist the literacy learner by helping them become aware of the way they think and process information. The learner can recall strategies for figuring out difficult words, for knowing if their reading sounds smooth and fluent, and for planning steps to improve their skills. These usually subconscious and evaluative skills can be made explicit to help the learner process new information in a less dependent way. For people from oral cultures, where meaning is negotiated through group interaction, these skills can to some extent be developed through self-talk. For example, the literacy teacher can ask the individual learners to verbalize the steps in a procedure or the criteria for judging performance. These processes could easily remain in the oral communication realm, such as jointly decoding words or verbalizing what good reading sounds like.

4. The church as literacy setting

As mentioned previously, the experience of going to church is largely an oral one in any culture. This is perfectly acceptable and appropriate, but there are ways that the experience of participating in church activities can be complementary to developing literacy skills and literate practice for daily life. In this section, we will return to the six types of scaffolding just discussed to see how the church setting can be a setting for literate practice.

Modeling – Fluent reading can be modeled in the church setting by the pastor/priest or designated reader, if the leader is not a fluent reader. This modeling scaffold can be further developed when all church members have a copy of the text being read and are encouraged to follow along. This may mean allowing time during the service for church members to find the appropriate place in their own books. Another way that modeling can be done is to have responsive readings, either with the whole or part of the congregation reading alternate verses, or by the congregation repeating the verse read by the leader and proceeding verse by verse.

Bridging – New readers will be supported through singing familiar songs from a song book. The words may be mostly memorized ahead of time, so the book is a support to the church members as they sing. The church members should also be encouraged to find the scripture verses that are being referred to and perhaps mark them for further reading on a later occasion.

Another possible scaffold to learning in the church setting might be for the leader to pose a question related to the topic of the message and have the church members think of a response from their own experience, which they then share with one other person.

Though not everyone will learn to write well, at least some people will need to become fluent writers. Writing will be a useful skill for those giving and reading announcements or for Sunday School teachers in preparing to teach their lessons. Writing new reading materials is an important skill for maintaining the use of the language. Bridging from oral text to similar written text will help this skill development.

Contextualizing – The use of metaphors and analogies is often a device that pastors/priests use to support the understanding of their church members and is also a device that Jesus and writers of the Bible used to convey truths to the people of their day. People's understanding of Scriptural analogies can be strengthened through the use of objects or pictures related to the passage being discussed, for example, showing a lamp or bringing in bland food for someone to taste then adding salt to it. Perhaps a dramatization of the Bible passage can be written and presented or perhaps it could be a modern-day version of the text. In one setting in Africa, readers and non-readers worked together to dramatize a story after a literate member read the text a few times (Michelle Petersen:2015).

Schema-building – A written/posted outline of the message is one way to help church members be prepared for what will be presented later in an oral form. Perhaps the leader can prepare a compare/contrast chart, with church members filling in the part based on what they know and then the pastor/priest helping to fill in the 'compare' side of the chart based on Bible times through the oral message (see appendix). Sometimes key points can be presented in written form with some of the words missing and church members listen for the missing words. Charts and outlines may be new media for oral learners, but by using them in an oral context with much support, the church members can gain additional organizational skills.

Re-presenting text – An important way to scaffold literate practice in the church setting is to present a printed text in multiple forms. Perhaps a drama is presented or a video is shown first, then the same passage is read from the Bible, then a song is created about the passage or about people's responses to it. Perhaps groups formulate questions on the passage which are used as a quiz or review. Perhaps different people take on the role of Bible characters and present the story from their perspective, which may be different from the perspectives of other characters. All of these activities help to support the printed text and bring it to life for people in oral cultures.

Developing metacognition – Leaders in the church can also support literate practice by providing strategies and tools for studying the Bible outside of the church context. Perhaps this will be in the form of Bible study materials or reading guides; perhaps this will entail setting up small groups for reading and discussing the Bible together (a good plan for relational cultures); perhaps this will mean teaching family heads how to use the Bible in daily family devotions. All of these activities help to provide a way to process and enhance understanding of the printed Word.

Conclusion

In this paper, the concept of scaffolding has been applied to the task of teaching people from oral cultures the skills of reading and writing. By supporting the learner through these means literate practice may seem less foreign and new avenues of communication may be opened up. Scaffolding techniques are really just good teaching practices, but for learners from oral cultures, literacy teachers need to use them more often and more intentionally to build success.

The church, though primarily an oral setting, can also be a setting for supporting literate practice, including Bible 'literacy,' for all church members. The inclusion of scaffolding techniques for oral literacy learners in the church setting can bring excitement and deeper understanding to all who participate.

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The ideas and examples presented here are compiled from many resources and my own experiences as well as those of co-workers over many years working in oral cultures.

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Appendix - sample chart

Comparisons	How it is now	How it was in Jesus' day
Planting a field	Plant rice by hand, one plug at a time	Scatter seeds over large area
Kinds of soil	Some is hilly and thin, some is rich and dark	Some hard, some thin, some thorny, some rich
Expected yield	About 40% increase	30%, 60%, 100%