Assessing Scripture Use Conditions with the Welser Scale

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Need for a Scripture Use Assessment Tool

When creating a Scripture use plan how do you get a grip on the pertinent conditions to be able to set goals and create a plan? Of the eight conditions that Wayne Dye has identified to be necessary for Scripture to be used (appropriate language, dialect and orthography; acceptable translation; accessible forms of Scripture; background knowledge of the hearer; availability; spiritual hunger of the community members; freedom to commit to Christian faith; and partnership between translators and other stakeholders) [1], which is the most important in this situation? A good assessment of the current situation is needed before a goal-oriented plan can be created. With limited time and resources, we want our efforts to hit the mark.

In 1999, Matt and Marcia Welser took the description of the original seven conditions that must be met for Scripture to be used [2], and developed a straightforward way to analyse the Scripture use potential of an ethnic group. The basic concept is to consider each condition separately, and to evaluate the degree to which that condition is met in that ethnic group. A numerical score is assigned to each condition to summarize the degree to which it is met in each significant subgroup of the language group. Its intention is to facilitate comparison between different conditions so as to determine the condition(s) that need most work. The scale has been used a number of times, with the common result that intuitions are clarified and all those involved are more able to see the Scripture use activities most needed. Following recent custom in missiology [3], Dye has begun calling this the Welser Scale.

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[1] 2009 Wayne Dye "The Eight Conditions of Scripture Engagement ", IJFM 26:2 Summer 2009, available at www.ijfm.org

[2] 1999 Wayne Dye "Conditions Necessary for Scripture to be Used", SIL International Scripture Use Caucus, May 1999

[3] e.g. the Engel scale and the Gray Matrix, both named after their inventors.

How to Use the Scale

Who participates in the assessment?

The assessment will be most effective if those who participate represent several perspectives. The translator team, including both local and expatriate members, would be the minimum to be involved. Literacy workers, local pastors and other mission partners can add significant insight. Though each person could fill out the scale on their own, further insight can come forth from a well-moderated group discussion. The group process can help different partners see the needs and set goals together. It is therefore wise for all involved in making the decisions to decide about all eight conditions together, rather than dividing the work and asking different people to decide on different conditions. For the same reason, all the conditions should be considered during the same time frame.

Scoring each condition

The scale has ten possible levels, from zero, for a completely unmet condition to 10, for a condition fully and completely met. There are many levels in an intuitive scale in order to facilitate the judging process by having enough levels at both ends of the scale to avoid awkward judgment calls. Few people will be willing to say a situation is as good or as bad as it can be, so in practice the end points of any intuitive judgment scale are not useful. The original scale went for negative 3 to positive 3. In practice, we found that in some situations our national co-workers were hesitant to choose a negative number, even when the condition was obviously a problem. So to avoid this we have added levels and made them all positive.

This is an intuitive scale because it is not possible to even approach an objective, quantifiable evaluation. The scale intuitively evaluates two factors simultaneously: both the degree to which a condition is met and the percentage of the group for which it is met. In any group there is going to be a minority of people different than the whole. (Those people eager for change, as well as rebels, the resistant, the rigidly traditional, or the totally indifferent individuals.) It seems best therefore to think about only the more cohesive 80% of each group of people, ignoring the 20% of people who do not fit into the condition. See the appendix for a list of suggested meanings for each level of the scale.

Identifying subgroups

It is often useful to identify subgroups within the language group on the basis of obvious differences in the way the conditions are met. For instance, usually the Christian community must be considered separately from those outside their community. Other breakdowns might be between Christian traditions (e.g. Orthodox vs. evangelical) or between socio-cultural situations (urban-rural, educated-uneducated). These subgroups will emerge as the assessment discussion takes place. Participants will say things like, "You can't make a general statement about how acceptable the translation is because different churches see it from different points of view." Or "You can't make one general statement about how available the Scriptures will be because it is so much harder to arrange for sale of materials in the island regions." It is possible

that different subgroups will be pertinent with each condition. In that case, you may need to customize the way the chart is laid out to label and list the various subgroups.

Drawing conclusions

After the group has scored each condition with its various subgroups, it is time to look over the results. Even if your group has been overly optimistic or pessimistic, the highest and lowest scores should be evident. Which of these conditions will be most favorable for Scripture use? Which of these conditions are the greatest hindrances to Scripture use? Comparing the lowest scored conditions, how do these interact and which needs to be addressed first with the most resources?

From here to a plan

Identifying the problem areas is the first step. From here, set goals and begin to brainstorm possible activities to bring about change. Focusing your Scripture use activities to bring change to the areas of greatest hindrance will give you the best results for your efforts.

An example

At the end of the article is an example of a completed scale for the Aukan language of Suriname. The assessment was made in 1999 at a meeting with Scripture use consultants as moderators, the expatriate translator and two local translators. Each condition was discussed and scored with comments added. The four subgroups that were significant for that setting were the Christians that lived in town (the capital), versus the non-Christians in town and the Christians in the interior (very isolated area) versus the non-Christians in the interior. Even though the group found it hard to assign scores, in the end, the lowest scores became obvious in the areas of literacy, availability and freedom to commit. This assessment then became the basis for developing a Scripture use plan.

Suggested meanings for each level of the scale
(Undefined numbers provide a gradation between the defined points)

- 10   This condition is fully met to such a degree it is a strong asset to the overall picture, even partially compensating for other conditions.

- 9

- 8   This condition is met to a significant degree. There is room for improvement, but it is unlikely that further improvement will make much difference in the level of Scripture use.

- 7

- 6   Some aspects of this condition are met, and it a slight hindrance to Scripture use. Usage is likely to improve if it were changed for the better.

- 5

- 4   This condition is poorly met and provides a partial hindrance to Scripture use, but not enough to totally block Scripture use, if other conditions are positive.

- 3

- 2   This condition is unmet to the degree that it provides a serious block to Scripture use, though the situation could be worse.

- 1

- 0   This condition is completely unmet and completely blocks the use of Scriptures.

ASSESSING CONDITIONS NECESSARY FOR SCRIPTURES TO BE USED
Blank assessment form

Rate each condition from a score of 10 (condition is fully met) to a score of 0 (condition is completely unmet) for each subgroup of the population you have listed.

Language Group Name: Date of Assessment:

Those who contributed to the assessment:

Name of subgroups: A: B: C: D:

1. **Appropriate Language, Dialect and Orthography**

   The language, dialect and orthography are all considered appropriate for expressing Biblical truth.

   Score Subgroups: A: B: C: D:

   Comments:

2. **Acceptable Translation**

   The style of the translation, the form it is presented in and the reputation of the translation team members are all considered acceptable.

   Score Subgroups: A: B: C: D:

   Comments:

3. **Accessible Forms of Scripture**

   People are able to read the scriptures or hear them read or see them dramatized.

   Score Subgroups: A: B: C: D:

   Comments:

4. **Background Knowledge of the Hearer**

   People understand enough Biblical history, culture and theology to make sense of the Scriptures.

   Score Subgroups: A: B: C: D:

Comments:

5. Availability

Everyone who wants copies of Scripture publications in their various forms can obtain them without too much effort or cost.

Score Subgroups: A: B: C: D:

Comments:

6. Spiritual Hunger of Community Members

People want to know God better.

Score Subgroups: A: B: C: D:

Comments:

7. Freedom to Commit to Christian Faith

People are spiritually free to follow Christ wholeheartedly, including turning from traditional religious practices.

Score Subgroups: A: B: C: D:

Comments:

8. Partnership Between Translators and Other Stakeholders

Local church leaders and missionaries use and promote the vernacular Scriptures.

Score Subgroups: A: B: C: D:

Comments:

Conclusions:

ASSESSING CONDITIONS NECESSARY FOR SCRIPTURES TO BE USED

Example of a completed assessment form

Rate each condition from a score of 10 (condition is fully met) to a score of 0 (condition is completely unmet) for each subgroup of the population you have listed.

Language Group Name: *Aukan*　　　　Date of Assessment: *11 Feb 1999*

Those who contributed to the assessment:

> *Scripture Use consultants, expatriate translator and two local translators.*

Name of subgroups:

A: *Town Christian*　　　B: *Town Non-Ch.*　　　C: *Interior Christian*　　　D: *Interior Non-Ch.*

1. **Appropriate Language, Dialect and Orthography**

   The language, dialect and orthography are all considered appropriate for expressing Biblical truth.

   Score Subgroups:　A: 6　　　　　B: 9　　　　　C: 4　　　　　D: 9

   Comments:
   A major shift is in progress toward greater pride and acceptance of the language by the people, especially since two cultural nights have been held.

2. **Acceptable Translation**

   The style of the translation, the form it is presented in and the reputation of the translation team members are all considered acceptable.

   Score Subgroups:　A: 7　　　　　B: 7　　　　　C: 7　　　　　D: 7

   Comments:
   With only about a 30-year history of Christians, there isn't a strong tradition of what words best describe key terms. The New Testament (NT) may bring some disagreement, and revision may be needed after a short time. The style is more dynamic than the most popular translation in the language of wider communication. There is a plan to include a tape with each NT to explain and promote the style that has been used.

3. **Accessible Forms of Scripture**

   People are able to read the scriptures or hear them read or see them dramatized.

   Score Subgroups:　A: 5　　　　　B: 5　　　　　C: 3　　　　　D: 2

Comments:
There is no written tradition, so transitional literacy classes are needed for those who can read the language of wider communication (many of those in town). Some primary literacy is needed in the interior. Non-print media can help reach the illiterates.

4. **Background Knowledge of the Hearer**

People understand enough Biblical history, culture and theology to make sense of the Scriptures.

Score Subgroups: A: 9   B: 9   C: 9   D: 6

Comments:
Team members, especially the Aukaners, felt that this was a very strong area. This should be examined carefully in the months following the dedication to see if people truly have enough background to understand the NT, or if additional help is needed.

5. **Availability**

Everyone who wants copies of Scripture publications in their various forms can obtain them without too much effort or cost.

Score Subgroups: A: 6   B: 4   C: 0   D: 0

Comments:
The NT will be available in stores through current distribution arrangements, but more would see it if it were available in the markets. Some churches have book tables. There is no system to make the materials available in the interior.

6. **Spiritual Hunger of Community Members**

People want to know God better.

Score Subgroups: A: 8   B: 6   C: 8   D: 6

Comments:
There is probably more desire for spiritual things than there is action to seek them out.

7. **Freedom to Commit to Christian Faith**

People are spiritually free to follow Christ wholeheartedly, including turning from traditional religious practices.

Score Subgroups: A: 7   B: 7   C: 1   D: 1

Comments:
Those in the interior have a lot of social pressure not to commit to Christ because that breaks up the ancestor worship cult. It is important for the whole village to participate in the proper burial rites. In town, they are removed from compulsory participation in ancestor worship and are freer to commit to Christ.

8. Partnership Between Translators and Other Stakeholders

Local church leaders and missionaries use and promote the vernacular Scriptures.

Score Subgroups: A: B: C: D:

Comments:
(*At the time of this assessment in 1999, there were only seven conditions considered and this one was not rated.*)

Conclusions:

Conditions for Scripture use in town will generally be positive, if transitional literacy and non-print media continue to be stressed. In the interior, however, availability and literacy are major weaknesses, coupled with stronger pressure to continue with the traditional religion.