

**TUTORIAL**  
**8.15**

# Assessing literacy needs

It can be difficult to answer the question; “Is there a need for a literacy project here or not?” because there are so many factors to consider. In this tutorial we will look at some of the major things that should be taken into account when deciding to get involved in a literacy project in a community.

## Introduction

The decision to be involved in some way in a community literacy project is a major one. For those who are the initial driving force behind the project, it will require careful planning and preparation of materials, as well as the motivating and training of local people to see them buy into the project and to eventually take it on as their own. As we saw in the last tutorial, a literacy project can be a very positive factor - some would say essential - in the growth and development of the community and the church.

So, how can a good decision be made? And if we do decide to initiate a literacy project, how can we decide what level or type of program is needed? There are a lot of factors to take into consideration, so we will separate them into these three major steps:

1. Understanding the role of literacy.
2. Doing socio-linguistic research.
3. Deciding on the type of program needed.

## 1. Understanding the role of literacy.

Firstly, are we convinced in the first place that an adequate level of literacy is even necessary? We discussed in the last tutorial that literacy is important for a community, and looked at all that literacy brings to a church. However, not everyone is convinced that all people should have the opportunity to become literate.

### “Orality”

Over the last decade or so, there has been a growing trend away from literacy and toward visual or oral learning. Ravi Zacharias, a Christian apologist and defender of rational thinking with regard to spiritual truth, frequently expresses

his concern about this trend. He talks about our being in a time where there is a “humiliation of the word” and an “exaltation of the image.” He states, “More and more we are knowing less and less about the printed tradition. The ability for abstract reasoning is diminishing in our time, because [people] come to their conclusions on the basis of images. Their capacity for abstract reasoning is gone.” (Ravi Zacharias, *Mind Games in a World of Images*)

John Piper asks the following question: “Will we labor to reverse the Western cultural trend away from reading, in the conviction that, when one moves away from reading, one moves away from a precious, God-given, edifying, stabilizing connection with God’s written word?”

In the area of church planting and development work, *literate* and *oral* approaches have often been pitted against one another, creating the idea that we have to decide on either one approach or the other. One of the results of this has been the growth of a strong “orality movement” and the implementation by some major missions organizations, among other things, of Biblical storytelling without any expository teaching, and to encourage the development of an “Oral Bible” rather than putting work into a written Bible translation.

Some people have gone so far as to say that it is actually wrong to teach people to read and write when they have traditionally been “oral peoples”. We won’t go into the details of the long and involved arguments here, but we can say that after some years of seeing the results of totally oral approaches in real communities, many of these more extreme methodologies have been reconsidered, and several major organizations have shifted their view back toward more careful and long-term approaches - again encouraging their workers to learn the heart language of the people and to develop written materials, including Bible translations, as part of their strategies.

Other organizations that have traditionally had a more ‘literate’ approach, have benefited from the research into oral communication that has come to light, and have reassessed their methodologies to include more of the storytelling features of the indigenous language and culture to increase the clarity of communication, and have put Scripture into use through songs, drama and other local cultural means that the local people enjoy and find beneficial.

### **A comprehensive approach**

The reality is that both oral and literate methods of communication are beneficial when planting a church and seeing it grow and develop in a community. Oral and literate methods are not mutually exclusive, but should be part of a comprehensive approach to passing on truth in the clearest and most compelling way possible.

God has created all peoples of the world to be oral communicators and He has also clearly used the tool of literacy as a complementary communication method throughout history in order to communicate Himself through His servants to the world. He has made a richness of communication available to human beings - we are able to use all of our senses in an almost endless variety and subtlety of communication techniques.

Communication with people whose life and interaction has been primarily or entirely oral should be in the style and naturalness of oral speaking - whether that is in daily communication, teaching, or in written materials including the translation of the Scriptures. Oral traditions of ethnic peoples are a rich resource for understanding how they communicate, and studying them will help us to introduce new information and truth into the society in the best way to deepen the understanding of the Message.

The key role of the narrative in many pre-literate societies provides a great opportunity for effective foundational, narrative Bible Teaching because it provides cohesion to the presentation of truth that the local people readily understand. In fact, it is something that seems to be universal across cultures - people enjoy and generally learn better from narrative style teaching. However, in our presentation of the true story of God's Word, we need to establish that the authority of our teaching is the written Word of God (if not, how does it differ from any other story that has been passed down through the ages?). The Word of God translated into the local language of the people is the visual evidence that God Himself is interested in communicating His Word to all peoples. We demonstrate our claim that God earnestly desires to communicate with man when we do the difficult work of Bible translation and if necessary, literacy program development.

But beyond the initial church planting effort, there are huge advantages for a local church whose members and leaders have the skill of literacy in their 'communication arsenal'. They will then be able to make use of the technological and communication developments impacting all parts of the world in order to reach out more effectively and grow in their ability to impact the wider community. They can also grow on to maturity and develop a healthy interdependence with other branches of the Church to partner effectively in ministry, not being limited only to ministry opportunities that do not require literacy skills.

## **2. Doing socio-linguistic research.**

Finding out the literacy level in a community is not as simple as just finding out how many people can read and write. There are many complex factors, including such things as:

- In an area where several languages are spoken, is one the primary language of education and trade, but not the language

most people speak at home? In which language are people more literate?

- What are the domains of literacy for various people? Are some people only able to function in the arena of buying and selling, can they only sign their name, read newspaper headlines, etc.?
- What is the status of literacy? For people living in a resource-poor country, literacy equals both social and economic capital. Being literate allows them to participate more fully in society and to access better jobs. People who have higher reading and writing levels also typically have higher income levels.
- What access to education does the community already have? Are there other organizations with the primary goal of education or literacy, and what programs are they running?

Doing a socio-linguistic survey should help to answer these and many other questions, and provide essential information to make a decision about the need for literacy and the type of program needed. There are a variety of research outlines available, three good ones are included on the website for you to download and read.

### **3. Deciding on the type of program needed.**

Based on the information gathered in a socio-linguistic survey, and other research, an adequate response to the need may be starting a full-blown literacy project in the community. However, it could simply mean developing more interesting reading material in the language and encouraging people to improve their reading and writing skills, or supporting an existing education program. In most developing communities there will be a need for some form of education or literacy program, so that eventually the whole community will have full access to God's Word.

For the sake of giving the most helpful and comprehensive information on all of the steps involved in literacy program development, in the following three tutorials we will be looking at the process of developing a literacy project 'from the ground up', in a context where there is initially a very low level of literacy in the community, with no existing written language, and where all materials need to be developed so people can learn to read and write in their own language. We will discuss the process of developing an orthography (alphabet), developing literacy materials, doing pre-literacy activities, the issues surrounding teaching either adults or children, teaching the literacy program and training teachers, and the development of an adequate post-literacy reading and fluency program.

There are still many contexts in the world today where this kind of program would be an adequate response to their need. In fact millions of people live in this kind of situation: in rural areas where they are cut off from education and

development (and often from the Truth as well). There are also many other contexts where there is some degree of education available to some or all of the community. Workers in those situations will have to carefully research and work with the community to decide on the type of literacy development that is needed.

Often too, the needs and motivation of a community change over time, and a literacy strategy should to be dynamic and flexible to keep up with the community and the particular people involved.



## **DISCUSSION POINTS**

*Assessing literacy needs*

1. What are some of the ways you can think of where God has used the tool of literacy as a complementary communication method throughout history in order to communicate Himself through His servants to the world?