Communicating Effectively to Non-Readers

How to Make Oral Communication More Effective

by Rick Brown

Introduction[1]

In seeking to free ourselves from the biases of a print-oriented culture, we need to consider, not only the kinds of media and discourse genre (e.g., narrative) that are most appropriate for oral cultures, but also the most effective ways to use those genres and media. What do non-readers like to see and hear? What do they enjoy listening to? Their choices will not necessarily be the same as those of print communicators. If the styles of presentation are ones which oral communicators prefer, then they will be more likely to listen, to understand, and to remember what they hear.

Sound quality is highly valued

Oral communicators are deeply affected by the sound quality of what they hear and not just the content. They especially like the sound of poems, songs, and catchy phrases. When conversing, they are alert to the intonation and voice qualities of every speaker, and they are quick to perceive insincerity or hidden meanings. When listening to stories, they are aware of every nuance of the storyteller's voice, and they appreciate a storyteller who modifies his or her voice to fit each part in the story. In many oral cultures, listeners feel free to interact with the storyteller and to participate in the story itself. When oral communicators engage in reading, they usually prefer to read aloud in groups, with the usual social interaction, rather than read alone or silently.

In many oral cultures the chief forms of art are verbal, such as epic poems and ballads.[2] Verbal contests are also common, such as trying to outdo one another in praises, insults, riddles or jokes.

Print communicators, on the other hand, are more affected by the content of what they read than by the sound of what they hear spoken. They evaluate a speech on the basis of its clear reasoning rather than the beauty and clarity of its articulation. They would rather write letters to the editor than take part in a live debate. They prefer to read alone, taking in the information they see on the printed page, without hearing the sound of the words in their minds.[3]

Print communicators find it hard to memorize, but oral communicators memorize quite well. It is important to note, however, that oral communicators memo-

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rize what they hear, not what they read. Furthermore, they memorize more quickly if the style is natural and enjoyable. Translated materials usually sound quite foreign and unattractive unless they are translated in a natural and attractive style. Slack (1991) notes that

> Oral presentations among oral communicators usually become an art form . As a result, a story that is artfully told is always more easily remembered than a story that is merely read aloud. It is far more difficult for the hearer to commit a story to memory that has been read as compared to a story that has been told. As much as is possible, the content of a story should be an oral construction and not the telling of a written, textually constructed story.[4]

As Viggo Søgaard often points out, a Scripture translation intended for audio presentation should "conform to the features, style, and structure of oral discourse rather than to those of the print medium. We need to find the right audio equivalent of print features such as paragraph indentations, section headings, quotation marks, footnotes, and so on, if we are to provide audiences with the same quality of text as we provide for readers" (1991:13/3).[5]

> The text should then be marked in such a way that the correct voice quality, dialect, speed, mood, etc. will be achieved, and correct sound effects and music utilized (1991:14/3).

This is usually indicated in the scripts by giving instructions for the voicers in brackets or in a parallel column. Some scripts also include underlining to indicate emphasis and slashes or dots to indicate pauses of various lengths.[6] Good voicers will rehearse both the text and how to say it until both are nearly memorized, and then the text can be recorded. A further need is to provide a guide or narrator to "provide the necessary introductions and explanations" (Søgaard 1995).

Even if the text is to be distributed by printed means, it is still important for it to sound good, because the readers may imagine the sounds as they read or they may read the text aloud to others.

If at all possible, one should use professional-quality actors for recording Scripture and other messages. This does more than just add appeal. A poorly spoken text may not even seem true.

> When a Scripture text is spoken or read aloud, the meaning which the listener receives depends not only on the words but also on the expression which the speaker gives the words (Søgaard 1991:13/3).

To an oral communicator, the credibility of a message is also related to how realistic it sounds. For this reason, since ancient times, rhetoric classes have taught that the speaker must express the emotions that correspond with what he is saying, or else people will not believe him. If the person voicing a part in a program does not play his role like an actor, then what he says will not sound believable. The voice should not distract the listener from the message, as Viggo Søgaard (1993: 139) notes:

> The tone of voice, the speed of delivery, and the use of words all say something about the speaker and his or her attitude to the audience. The voice has to be so good and so appropriate that the listener will actually forget the voice and listen to the content. The use of personal testimonies, whether given through a monologue, in an interview, or through a song, may be the best approach to this.

We have noted that oral communicators are acutely sensitive to the sound quality of communications. This has a number of implications for the development of materials for oral audiences:

- *Implication: Ideally, recordings should be produced using professional actors, directors, and musicians, as well as professional studios and technicians. Good acting, good and appropriate local music, and suitable sound effects can make the programs more popular and more influential.*
- *Implication: Scripture translations, radio programs, dramatic scripts, stories and testimonies should be phrased in such a way that they sound good to the ear.*

- *Implication: The voices used should be pleasant to listen to; the announcer should sound warm.*
- *Implication: The speech in a dialogue, testimony, interview or drama should sound realistic.*

One method that helps an author make a good-sounding composition or translation is for him or her to say it aloud before writing it, or even to speak it onto tape and then write it afterwards. Malmstrom calls this the "think-it,-say-it,-and-then-write-it" technique (1991:113). The finished draft can then be recorded onto tape and used for testing among oral communicators. It often happens during the recording process that awkward or ambiguous phrases come to light, and these can be changed on the spot.

Often the voicers will mention phrases that sound unnatural or unclear and will recommend improvements. But they will also make small changes subconsciously, especially if they have nearly memorized their parts. Their changes will sometimes reveal better wordings, but sometimes they reflect a misunderstanding. In either case the text may need to be revised. To that end it is good for the author or a script-controller to be present during recordings, both to ensure adherence to the text and to approve changes to the text.

When listening to Scripture portions broadcast by radio, relationship-oriented listeners are more likely to listen with an open mind and a warm heart if the speaker treats them in a relational way. Søgaard points out that because the message of the Gospel is about a relationship, people need to receive the message in the context of a relationship, even through radio. He notes that

> the broadcaster must be communicated as a person and the listeners must be treated as individuals and not as an ill-defined 'mass'. … Special attention must be given to safeguarding this person-centered approach in radio communication (1993: 139).

FEBA, in its radio broadcasts and correspondence, has succeeded in developing a number of good relationships in spite of the physical dis-

tance. Sometimes this takes the form of regular personal correspondence between certain listeners and one of FEBA's correspondents. Sometimes they air messages from their listeners, and even responses to them from other listeners.

- *Implication: Radio programs are more effective when the announcer treats his listeners as valued individuals. Personal relationships can be developed through follow-up with letters, telephone calls, and the broadcasting of personal letters.*

Music and poetry can be used effectively with oral cultures

Music and song are enjoyed by all cultures, but narrative songs seem to be particularly characteristic of oral cultures. In Egypt, some ballads have been very popular over the centuries, such as *Hasan wa Na'ima* and *Yâ lêla bêda*, and many people have memorized the words. The songs of Um Kulthum are long repetitive ballads. A major radio station plays them for several hours every afternoon! It does not bother people that they have heard the same songs repeatedly for years, because they like the repetition.

The same applies to Scripture ballads. Malmstrom notes that "Scripture-in-song is undoubtedly the most popular method of presenting vernacular Scriptures" and that a straight reading of Scripture is the least popular (1991:120). Porter (1995) notes that sales of Scripture-in-song "far exceed those of any other cassettes produced". Klem ran an experiment among Yoruba speakers in Nigeria comparing the learning of Scripture-in-song with non-musical Scripture tapes and printed Scripture. He found that people learned the least from the printed Scriptures, but when singing was involved, the people retained more information and they memorized the text more quickly (Klem 1982:167-78).[7]

Kenneth Cragg notes that poetry is "the medium vital to nonliterate society and especially dear to the Arab heart" (1991:47). Poetry can be used to tell a whole story, as in a ballad, or recited at breaks in the story. In a series on the lives of the prophets, the narrator concluded each episode with a poem or song about the prophet, in place of a musical interlude. Along with riddles, proverbs and parables, these are normal components of oral communication, and they are popular art forms in oral cultures today.[8]

- *Implication: The use of oral art forms, such as music, songs, poetry, riddles, parables, and proverbs, attracts listeners, improves communication, and helps people remember what they have learned.*

A common mistake made by some cross-cultural broadcasters and

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producers is to assume that music is a universal language. This is simply not true. For one thing, rhythms and melodies usually reflect the metrical and intonational patterns of each language, and these are not universal. An intonation that signals politeness in one language may signal disbelief in another. Beyond that, people prefer their own music, and it helps them identify with the program. A musical score that sounds beautiful to a Westerner may sound dissonant to someone else and hinder them from opening up to the message.

But even the use of local music can be unhelpful if it is not used appropriately. Each culture has its own genres of music, and each form has a particular function. It would be inappropriate to use victory music at a tragic scene, party music at a serious scene, or shaman music at a worship scene. Skilled local musicians can usually choose the right kinds of local music for each scene. It can also be helpful to ask an ethnomusicologist for advice.

- *Implication: Good and appropriate local music, along with suitable sound effects, can make radio programs, videos, and audio products more popular and more influential.*

It is not inexpensive to produce appealing, high-quality tapes and radio programs that can compare favorably with the commercial products. The expense is small, however, compared with the costs of staff, air time, and cassette distribution. So it makes economic sense to record the messages in a form that will make them appealing, communicative, and effective.

Oral cultures require their own narrative style

In the course of training authors and translators, western teachers with a print orientation sometimes teach the trainees to avoid repetition of similar words, phrases, and content, and they teach them to use a variety of subordinate conjunctions (e.g., *while*, *since*, *although*, etc.) rather than coordinate conjunctions such as *and*. People should be trained, however, to match the discourse conventions of their own languages. In most oral cultures, repetition is appreciated and subordinate clauses are uncommon. Using the same term or expression repeatedly, without seeking variety, helps memorization and rarely bores oral communicators.

In most oral cultures, speakers usually string sentences together with coordinate conjunctions such as *and*, *but* and *then*. They also repeat some of the information, and they don't mind using the same word twice in close proximity. In general, oral communicators appreciate repetition, in case they missed hearing something the first time it was said, and they don't mind using lots of words to say something. (Speaking is quick and easy compared to writing and printing text!) They also use words in set phrases, such as sayings, proverbs, riddles, formulas, or repeated descriptions such as *the brave soldier*. Print communicators, on the other hand, prefer to use a few words to say

much, because writing is slow. They avoid repetition, since material that is missed can always be read again. Print communicators typically avoid overuse of conjunctions like *and*, preferring to join sentences with subordinate conjunctions such as *while*, *since*, *although*, and *after*.[9]

Although the Gospel of Mark is a written work, Kelber (1983) has shown that it has the features of oral communication. This should not surprise us. According to Papias (writing about 125 A.D.), Peter communicated the Gospel orally in Hebrew or Aramaic, while Mark simultaneously interpreted it into Greek, and Mark eventually committed this oral story to writing in the Gospel that bears his name.[10] So Mark is the written form of an oral communication to a predominantly oral audience. For that matter, the sayings of Jesus and most of the Old Testament are written records of oral communications.

- *Implication: Repetition, slow information flow, and short, simple sentences may make translated Scripture and other materials more pleasant to listen to, more likely to be understood, and easier to memorize. As Søgaard (1991) notes, "It is difficult to follow long and complicated sentences when listening to a tape."*
- *Implication: Trainers, authors, and Bible translators should study natural, well-formed texts spoken by good storytellers in the target language in order to learn the features of good oral discourse in that language.*

Melodrama is often valued

Stories told by people in oral cultures are often characterized by the use of exaggeration, both in content and in the dramatic style of the storyteller. Their dramas tend to be melodramatic. Most of the popular films and soap operas produced in India and Egypt, for example, are melodramatic. The print-oriented person is likely to object to over-wrought melodrama, but it is normal for most oral cultures.

Oral communicators like stories that dramatize a struggle against an enemy. They describe the characters of their stories in exaggerated terms, either very good or very bad, and they use exaggerated praise and scorn. They also use their hands to help express themselves when they tell stories, through gestures or by playing musical instruments. They leave much unsaid, depending instead on shared situation, shared culture, intonation, facial expression, and hand gestures to help tell the story. Print communicators, on the other hand, prefer realistic characters in stories, and they are moderate in expressing praise or scorn. Their art forms emphasize a struggle to reach a goal or to overcome an obstacle. They use logical argument to make their point, rather than depending on illustrations. They use their hands little, since gestures are not written or read.[11]

- *Implication: There is a place for exaggerated descriptions and melodramatic intonation. Although these may sound "phony" to print-oriented people, they can seem quite natural and appealing to oral communicators, if they are characteristic of their story-telling styles and are used appropriately.*

Realistic visuals are preferred to abstract visuals

Young or unsophisticated oral communicators are often puzzled by abstract pictures, whereas they readily accept and understand realistic ones. (Abstract images are ones in which the features are generalized so that specific features need to be imagined. Examples would be watercolors in which facial features are missing, line drawings in which features are missing or disconnected, and drawings of incomplete bodies.) It is not an abstraction for an image to be symbolic or to be drawn with exaggerated features, as long as they are not grossly exaggerated. But the use of cartoon-like drawings in Scripture and Scriptural animations is problematic. Some people groups accept them if they are reasonably realistic and not exaggerated in a comic way, but others reject them, especially if they depict prophets and other honored personalities.

- *Implication: Abstract representations are not generally helpful to oral communicators. Pictures are more likely to be understood and accepted if the images are reasonably complete and realistic.*

Literacy may not always be the best strategy

Literacy opens doors to education and economic advancement, but literacy has drawbacks as well. One is that literacy programs require massive investments of time, personnel, and funding to achieve just a 5% rate of functional literacy, and they usually benefit only those who are able to take classes. Often they do not reach the leaders of oral communities, the ones in the best position to bring about positive change in the community. But literacy for the leaders is not always the answer, either. Slack and others have pointed out that

> in many places, oral communicators have initially been more responsive to the Gospel than the more educated and technically oriented people (Slack 1991).

As missionary work progressed, however, schools were established and pastors and teachers trained. These schools singled out those students who could learn by Western methods, and eventually produced a small class of people, a new middle class, who could handle this communicative style and use it in the church. Thus the church became increasingly confined to the emerging middle class and often failed to communicate the Gospel effectively with those who were less educated.

> The two groups within the community did not know the same things, nor did they think the same way even when they had the same information (Klem 1995).

Many mission leaders of the past also assumed that the written word was necessary for effective ministry, but again, the facts disprove this. There are godly Christian pastors and evangelists who are not functionally literate, but who have memorized the Word and internalized its message.

Oral communicators are often the best ones to reach other non-readers, because they have not lost their oral communication skills. As Ong points out, when people become more highly literate, they lose their ability to memorize, to compose oral art forms, and to communicate orally in traditional ways (Ong 1982:15, 59). Klem (1995) notes:

> Many times I have visited pastors and missionaries who have told me that the best evangelists in their area were non-literates, both men and women, old and young. In some cases some of the preachers could not read. They either recited from memory or had other people read the text they would expound upon.

For that matter, the method of Chronological Bible Storying[12] has been effective, not only in evangelism and discipleship, but particularly in equipping illiterate believers to become leaders, teachers, and evangelists. Klem (1995) advocates training non-reading church leaders and evangelists by means of storying and narrative-based teaching, as well as by memorization of Scripture tapes and Scripture songs.

Audio tapes provide a means to equip almost anyone to witness effectively among oral communicators. They do not need to be trained teachers, literate or otherwise. They can use tapes in their ministry, because the recorded word often has more authority and credibility than personal storytelling. Mae Alice Reggy (1995), a UBS Media Consultant, noted that "Audio portions have opened new doors for witnessing because they are seemingly less threatening." In some countries believers buy audiotapes of Scripture stories to share with friends and co-workers. They play them at home and at work, and many who hear the tapes ask to borrow them. They also listen to them together and discuss them. People also learn the stories and tell them to others. Steffen (1996) notes that "Stories create instant evangelists. People find it very easy to repeat a good story."

Literacy is not always an option. There are language communities where the people like their language

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but do not want it to be written; they have a rich oral literature but they don't want it or anything else in their language to be published. Some governments even forbid minority languages to be written, and this makes literacy less feasible as well. In these cases oral communications are the only option.

William Graham's thorough study of Scripture use in various literate cultures has shown that depending on literacy for primary access to the Bible can actually result in people valuing the Bible less:

> The capacity for mass production, widespread distribution, and increased reading of scripture has been inherent in the typographic and literacy revolutions. … However, putting a Bible in everyone's hands has had mixed consequences for the status of the Bible in the culture as a whole. … At the least, we can observe in the past century or more that, just as availability of the biblical text has greatly increased through growth of literacy and the ubiquitous presence of printed Bibles, the strong biblical saturation of Western culture has sharply decreased. (1987:167)[13]

- *Implication: Oral communicators are often the best ones at ministering to other oral communicators. They can be trained with stories and audio media , and they can use stories and tapes in their ministry to others.*
- *Implication: Printed materials alone are usually inadequate for mass communication among the members of oral cultures. They need to be supplemented or even replaced with non-print materials to achieve the desired results. In particular, most oral communicators will benefit more from non-print versions of Scripture than from printed versions.*

Distribution
In communities where tape players and CD players are widely available, the use of audio media provides a sustainable means for local people to

copy and distribute audio Scriptures and other non-print materials. Where radio broadcasting is possible, the airing of recorded Scripture permits anyone with a radio-cassette recorder to record audio portions of Scripture and other materials, regardless of distance, health, or religious or political isolation. In some locations video scriptures are being distributed through television broadcasting.

- *Implication: In many multimedia cultures, the production and distribution of Scripture is locally sustainable in non-print media more than it is in print. In some limited-access locations, Scripture is more accessible by radio and satellite than by any other form of distribution.*

Conclusion
Oral cultures have their own preferences for ways to communicate truth, and these will often be different from what print-oriented people prefer. In order to share the message most effectively, we need to find out what media and methods work best for them. In most cases this will include a multimedia approach with an emphasis on memorizing the Scriptures with the aid of high-quality recordings from skilled actors or voicers. **IJFM**

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Endnotes

[1] This article continues a topic addressed by the author in *IJFM* 21:3. Grateful acknowledgement is given to Val Carleton for her editorial assistance.

[2] See Jousse 1990 for an account of oral art forms and their significance in oral societies.

[3] For further discussion see Ong (1982:14, 42-44, 73, 109, 121, 131, 177).

[4] See also Søgaard 1991 and Malmstrom 1991.

[5] See Stine (1991) for more on the differences between oral and written discourse styles and their implications for audio translations.

[6] Thomas (1991) describes in detail how to prepare an oral translation for recording. In the same journal issue, Stine (1991) explores the differences between oral and written discourse styles and their implications for audio translations. I would also recommend the other articles in this same issue of the UBS Bulletin, which is entitled *The Scriptures in Audio-Video Format.*

[7] Those who could read did best when they read the text while listening to it in song.

[8] The symbolism in the book of Revelation does not seem as uncomfortably weird to oral communicators as it does to some print-oriented people;

Revelation reminds them of their dreams, which they also value as communicative.

[9] Ong (1982:37-40).

[10] Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, III xxxix 16.

[11] Ong (1982:44-47, 67, 70, 104-106).

[12] See Lovejoy et al (2001). Chrono-logical Bible Storying (CBS) resembles the method of chronological Bible teaching (CBT) described in McIlwain (1992) and exemplified in Bramsen (1998), but it also differs in important respects. CBT is basically an expository approach that teaches important events of the Bible, whereas CBS is a narrative approach that does not lecture on the text but rather encourages listeners to discover the meaning for themselves through dialogue and reflection. More than that, CBS strongly encourages participants to memorize the narratives (and psalms and proverbs) as their "oral Bible" and to retell the stories to others in appropri-ate contexts. CBS utilizes the learner-centered educational principles of Vella (1994) and adapts them to the learning and transmission styles of oral cultures.

[13] Graham goes on to ask if this will happen in other cultures:

> If the rise of typographic, mass-literacy culture and the concomitant decline of scriptural orality in general can be linked to the secularization and the diminished visible importance of scriptural and other "classical" texts in the West, are similar developments in other cultures with respect to their central scriptural texts also closely linked to secularization? (1987:168)