TEACHING NONLITERATE ADULTS IN ORAL CULTURES: FINDINGS FROM PRACTITIONERS

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ABSTRACT: Literacy is the gatekeeper to modern information. In the world today, approximately 740 million adults are excluded from adult education if that education uses literate instructional strategies. Nearly ¾ of a billion adults, many of whom speak unwritten languages, do not use reading to learn new information nor share information through writing. Most nonliterate adults live in oral cultures where information and culture are transmitted in the same way they have been shared for centuries, using oral strategies. Though becoming literate should be encouraged where possible, there are times, as the Ebola outbreak of 2014 illustrated, when literates need to share information with nonliterates quickly. This paper reviews some of the findings of a research study in which 54 literates who have experience teaching nonliterate adults without using literacy shared their perceptions of characteristics of nonliterate adults, personal competencies of effective literate instructors, and effective instructional strategies. Using a modified Delphi method, the researcher sought consensus from the participants on 85 statements concerning the topic of teaching nonliterate adults in oral cultures. By the end of the second round of questionnaires, the participants had reached a consensus, defined as an interquartile range of one or less, on 93% of the 85 statements.

Is illiteracy a disease? Writers for the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) have discussed the difficulty of eradicating adult illiteracy (UNESCO, 2014b). The inability to read and write has been tied to poverty, poor health, and social exclusion, while the ability to read and write is viewed as necessary for participation in modern society (UNESCO, 2013, 2014b).

Some writers for UNESCO have acknowledged that focusing on illiteracy has been a way for some to identify people by what they lack, an attempt to make others irrelevant by relegating them to the fringe of a culture (UNESCO, 2005b). Though some call for more research to inform literacy policy (UNESCO, 2014a), in many of the writings about literacy, there appears to be an assumption that literacy is the key to acquiring modern information and that without possessing this key, such information can be inaccessible and incomprehensible (UNESCO 2005a, 2005b, 2013, 2014b). Literates, as the ones with the key that can unlock information, are the "haves," and illiterates are the "have-nots." If teachers could be trained to use nonliterate methods to share modern information with adults who lack literacy, what would be the outcome? Would we see an amelioration of health issues, a decrease in poverty, and an interest in improved agricultural methods? Is it possible that in adult education, we have focused more on a way to share information (literacy) than on the information itself?

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This paper summarizes and discusses some of the findings of a descriptive study, a study conducted to gather insight from experienced practitioners regarding teaching nonliterate adults in oral cultures (Thompson, 2015). In a descriptive study, the investigator does not manipulate variables but seeks to acquire and document information in order to establish a foundation for future research (Cook, Rumrill, Webb, & Tankersley, 2001; Shavelson & Towne, 2002; Szymanski, 1993). This descriptive study was undertaken to gather information from literates who have used oral methods to effectively share information with nonliterate adults in oral cultures.

The research questions were:

> What do literate instructors perceive as the characteristics of nonliterate adults within oral cultures?

> What personal competencies do literate instructors perceive increase their teaching effectiveness with nonliterate adults within oral cultures?

> What do literate instructors perceive to be effective instructional strategies when teaching nonliterate adults within oral cultures?

Because of the negative stigma associated with the term, "illiterate," the term "nonliterate" was used in the study and will be used in this paper. A nonliterate adult is one "who cannot receive information by reading and who does not communicate with others through writing" (Thompson, 2015, p. 6).

It is ironic that literates must use writing to educate other literates about the needs of nonliterate adult learners as nonliterates do not write about their own learning needs. Such education is necessary, however, because literacy has become the gatekeeper for modern information. It appears there is an assumption that if people were interested in modern information, they would become literate, and once literate, they would then have access to modern information. It appears there is also an assumption that once people have access to information, they will use such information to ameliorate their lives. Does literacy equal access? Without entering into a discussion as to what constitutes a better life, usually defined in relation to Western values, it is unknown whether nonliterates would put modern information into use because such information has largely been offered to them through only one avenue - literacy.

Though literacy definitions vary from country to country, all definitions include the ability to read and write. Some countries also require individuals to have a particular level of schooling before they can be considered literate (UNESCO, 2005a). In 2003, because of the difficulty of ascertaining progress in the global literacy rate due to countries' varying definitions of literacy, UNESCO convened a conference where an expert panel, in a later publication, defined literacy as:

> … the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts.

Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge and potential, and participate fully in community and wider society. (UNESCO, 2005b, p. 21)

When a culture is based and dependent upon literacy, people in that culture may be unaware of oral cultures, "a society where its members value oral tradition and use oral instructional strategies for teaching, communication, or the transmission of culture" (Thompson, 2015, p. 7). In literate cultures, nonliterates are usually preschool children or those who have a developmental issue that prevents them from learning to read. It can be easy for those from a literate culture to assign childlike characteristics to nonliterate adults or to see them as developmentally challenged. However, UNESCO (2014b) estimates that there are 774 million nonliterate adults in the world today. Some adults speak a language that has never been written. A living language is a language that is the mother tongue of at least one person. Linguists estimate that over 3,500 living languages exist today that do not have a developed writing system (Lewis, Simons, & Fennig, 2014). Are all adults who speak an unwritten language or who follow an oral tradition childlike or developmentally challenged? Could it be that these adults operate in cultures foreign to our own as they transmit knowledge and culture orally in the same way their people have done for thousands of years? Could it be that many literates are the ones who are childlike and challenged when it comes to understanding oral cultures?

In today's world, it would be difficult to find a culture untouched by writing. In buying a soft drink or filling a prescription, one is confronted by the written word. Widespread literacy has been linked to the rise of individualism, decentralized government, and objectified knowledge (Thompson, 2014). No one can deny the benefits of becoming literate, and people should become literate whenever possible. Global organizations such as UNESCO as well as local governments must continue their efforts to encourage literacy. Equally important for the global stage, however, is equipping literates to enter the world of the nonliterate to share modern information using instructional strategies that are effective in oral cultures. The Ebola outbreak of 2014 showed us this need.

Original Study: Participants and Data Collection

How does one develop a foundation of knowledge about an unexplored phenomenon? In descriptive studies, surveys are often used when investigators want to measure a phenomenon but would have difficulty observing it (Cook & Cook, 2008). A survey can be taken of a random sample in the belief that the views of the sample represent the views of the larger population to which the sample belongs. The population of literates who have experience teaching nonliterate adults in oral cultures is unknown, however. Because the investigator wished to form a knowledge base by leading those who have experience teaching nonliterate adults in oral cultures to come to consensus on basic information, and because the participants lived in various parts of the world, often in remote areas, it was decided that a modified Delphi method was the best research vehicle for this study.

The Delphi method, a research tool employed to gain consensus on an issue from those qualified to comment, has been in use for over five decades. Begun as a method to obtain a consensus from experts on their views of future phenomena, the method has evolved into a way of gathering knowledge from diverse experts who remain anonymous to each other. In the Delphi method, experienced participants are formed into a panel and respond to a series of succeeding questionnaires until consensus is reached (Garson, 2014; Landeta, 2006). The traditional Delphi method begins with open-ended questions about the topic of study with responses to these questions leading to formulated statements. In the modified Delphi method, the investigator uses the extant literature to develop statements, presenting these statements to the panel for their responses (Johnston et al., 2014; Weatherman & Swenson, 1974; Zunker & Pearce, 2012). Responses are collated and questionnaire rounds continue until the research questions are answered or the investigator determines enough information has been exchanged.

For this study, fifty-four participants with varying levels of experience in different geographical regions shared their perceptions of teaching nonliterate adults in oral cultures. The study was concluded after two rounds of questionnaires. Participants that made up the panel were recruited using snowball sampling as practitioners forwarded a recruitment email to those they knew were currently teaching or had taught nonliterates. The following table gives the demographic characteristics of the participants. There were no participants below the age of 30.

Table 3

Demographic Characteristics of Participant Panel (N = 54)

Characteristic	*n*	%
Sex		
Male	23	43
Female	31	57
Age		
30 – 39	8	15
40 – 49	2	4
50 – 59	25	46
60 or above	19	35
Level of Experience		
Novice	8	15
Experienced	46	85
Locations Where Nonliterates Taught		
Africa	45	83
Asia and Pacific	9	17
Arab States	3	6
Europe and North America	2	4
South and Latin America, Caribbean	5	9
Topics Taught to Nonliterate Adults		
Agriculture	8	15
Bible	53	98
Church	28	52
Community Health	24	44
Government	1	2

Individual and Family Health	23	43
Job Skills	6	11
Literacy	18	33
Marriage and Family	18	33
Music	7	13
Other: Special Needs Education	1	2

Note. Percentages are over 100 because some participants taught multiple topics in multiple locations. Reprinted from *Perceptions of Teaching Nonliterate Adults in Oral Cultures: A Modified Delphi Study*, p. 74, by L.W. Thompson, 2015.

Through a review of the literature, the investigator identified 15 competencies involved in teaching nonliterate adults and prepared 66 statements related to these competencies. In Round One, the participants were asked to respond to the 66 statements using a 6-point Likert-type scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The participants were also asked to include comments or provide other statements that could be presented to the participants in a subsequent second round questionnaire. In Round Two, the participants were shown the round one questionnaire results. Those responses which had reached consensus, defined as having an interquartile range of one or less, were noted. Participants were shown not only the groups' responses but reminded of their own responses so that each participant could compare his or her responses with those of others. In Round Two, participants could change their responses to the round one questionnaire if they wished. Nineteen additional statements were suggested by the participants or developed from comments following Round One. These new statements were presented to the participant panel for their responses in Round Two. Fifty-three panel members participated in Round Two. Thus, participants who took part in both questionnaire rounds responded to a total of 85 statements. After the first round, 51 of the 66 (77%) statements reached consensus. At the end of the second round, 79 of the 85 (93%) statements had reached consensus. Included in the original study is an analysis of each of the 85 statements as well as the participants' responses categorized by their sex, experience-level, and whether or not their teaching experience was in Africa or in other global regions.

Findings cannot be generalized to all nonliterate adults or literate teachers of nonliterate adults in oral cultures. Each nonliterate adult and each teaching situation is unique. Though not every participant was familiar with every concept or agreed with every statement, the participants reached consensus on many characteristics of nonliterate adults, personal competencies that help a literate instructor be more effective, and instructional strategies that the participants have used and found to be effective in teaching nonliterate adults in oral cultures. The following discusses some of those findings.

Findings: Characteristics of Nonliterate Adults

The participants' responses painted a picture of the nonliterates with whom they had come in contact. The statements about nonliterate adults with which the participants were in agreement were those statements that pertained to the importance of oral language in the life of nonliterate adults and the relationship of nonliterate adults to their culture and modern society.

Concerning the place of oral language, the participants had found that nonliterate adults appreciated the beauty and sound of language and often distinguished themselves from each other by their ability to use language. Children in oral cultures, who have not yet mastered the ability to sprinkle their speech with proverbs or stories, must speak directly. Flowery and circuitous language as well as melodramatic bantering are the marks of adults. Specialists, with years of training, may advance to become verbal artists and are appreciated for their verbal prowess. Participants strongly agreed (67%) or agreed (26%) that among nonliterates, the relationship between the person giving a message and the person receiving it is an integral part of the communication process.

Oral cultures are necessarily collectivistic cultures because nonliterate members must depend upon each other for information (Thompson, 2014). Participants perceived that nonliterate adults view isolation from the group as punishment. Knowledge consists of what the adults can bring to mind, though each person is unique and varies in his or her memory ability. Knowledge is accrued over time, and elders, as those who have been alive longer and thus have greater stores of knowledge, are respected in traditional cultures. Each individual has a role which he or she must exercise for the good of the community. Infants are expected to have easy access to their mothers, and rather than separating children from adults, children "hang around" adults, observing and absorbing what they can, shooed away only if they become rowdy or too distracting. Specialized knowledge such as that used by midwives, healers, tailors, potters, and others, is usually learned through apprenticeship. Such knowledge may take years to acquire and is practiced for the good of the group. Secret knowledge is not shared with just anyone but is passed on to those deemed worthy to receive it, a worthiness often defined by one's position at birth rather than merit.

When it came to the relationship between nonliterate adults and the literate world, participants disagreed with each other. Though 15% of the participants strongly agreed and 30% agreed that nonliterate adults were conscious of living in a literate world, another 40% of the participants only slightly agreed with this statement. Another 6% disagreed and 8% slightly disagreed that nonliterates are aware of the literate world. Participants agreed that nonliterate adults believe their way of knowing is not respected by literates. One participant commented that literates often think of nonliterates as "hillbillies." Participants agreed that nonliterates believe that their children are exposed to cultural values in school that differ from their own. Participants did not reach consensus as to whether nonliterates feel they have more freedom than literates. Some participants believed the nonliterates with whom they came in contact believed they had more freedom than literates whereas other participants believed nonliterates felt their lack of literacy was a hindrance. One participant commented that nonliterates generally belong to an ethnic group that has been the object of discrimination or excluded from governmental power. A statement to this effect was formulated and presented to the participants in the second round. The median response of those with non-African experience was "Agree," though those with African experience only slightly agreed with this statement. Participants agreed that the nonliterates they knew were more accepting of the pain of life such as hard physical labor or extreme temperatures than literates. Participants also agreed that nonliterate adults participate more fully in a development project if they

believe the project corresponds to their felt needs. One participant commented and in Round Two the other participants agreed that nonliterate adults may participate in development projects even if they do not believe it corresponds with their needs if they think that by doing so they can build relationships and have their needs met in the future.

Findings: Personal Competencies of Effective Instructors

Participants acknowledged that literate instructors who are effective in teaching nonliterate adults in oral cultures respect nonliterate adults and value oral cultures, are conscious of their own ineptitude in oral cultures, and create teaching environments that cater to the needs of the students rather than their own needs. Asked to comment about how they knew their teaching was effective, many of the participants reported that they had personally witnessed changes in nonliterates' lives as information that had been shared was put into practice.

Almost all of the participants (92%) strongly agreed or agreed that effective literate instructors value oral cultures. Participants strongly agreed that effective instructors investigate the local culture and demonstrate cultural awareness. One participant commented that a teacher's effectiveness is directly tied to how much one values oral cultures in that the more one respects nonliterate adults and values oral cultures, the more effective one will be. A statement to this effect was formulated and presented to the participants for their response in the second round. Fifty-seven percent of participants strongly agreed with this statement and 40% agreed with it.

The participants agreed that their own literacy prohibited them from totally understanding their nonliterate students or mastering the oral skills exhibited by their students. The participants strongly agreed that the role of the teacher is based upon the relationship between teacher and student and agreed that the student expects to have access to the teacher's daily life outside of the teaching situation.

Participants agreed that effective literate instructors create learning situations with their nonliterate adult students' needs in mind, including helping their students navigate the literate world such as understanding warning signs or health care instructions. Effective instructors are aware of their students' difficulty in using literacy-based tools such as pencils or literate teaching methods such as sequencing or drawing. Participants agreed that effective literate instructors create teaching environments where community children "hanging around" are not considered a distraction.

A comment from a participant in the first round led to a statement that was presented to participants in the second round concerning the need for an effective instructor to have "patience, patience, patience." Participants strongly agreed (60%) or agreed (34%) with this statement, and no participants disagreed with it. Participants also agreed with statements presented to them in the second round that effective literate instructors exhibit oral strategies in their own lives, such as speaking in stories and proverbs, and create environments where instead of coming across as a teacher, they orchestrate teachable moments in which learning "happens."

After the first round, a participant comment about working with local literate translators led to the following statement that was presented to the participants in the second round: "Literate adults who are effective instructors of nonliterate adults, when using a local, literate translator, must be aware of their translator's attitude toward nonliterate adults and their learning needs" (Thompson, 2015, p. 127). Fifty-seven percent of the participants strongly agreed with this statement and 40% agreed with it.

Findings: Effective Instructional Strategies

The participants responded to statements concerning effective instructional strategies and learning processes that literate instructors can use with nonliterate adults in oral cultures. Though the participants agreed as to the efficacy of traditional oral methods such as stories, proverbs, and songs, the participants disagreed about the usefulness of some methods tied to technology such as video and audio recordings.

Concerning the use of stories, 72% of the participants strongly agreed and 24% agreed that effective literate instructors use stories to help their students organize and store knowledge. They also strongly agreed that storytelling is effective in helping adult nonliterates learn new knowledge. Participants agreed on the efficacy of proverbs, objects, landmarks, songs, apprenticeship, and events to help nonliterate adults learn, organize, store, and recall information.

After participant comments in Round One about other instructional strategies they had found effective, new statements were presented to the participants in Round Two. The participants agreed that games were helpful in building relationships and teaching. Demonstrations, drama, and role play were also mentioned as effective instructional strategies.

Participants agreed that cell phones could be used to help nonliterates learn new information and that interactive radio programming created for nonliterates was more effective than programming that began with a written text or was tied to literacy. Participants could not reach consensus about the efficacy of video recordings and only reached consensus on audio recordings, agreeing on their usefulness, after Round Two. Some participants noted the lack of electricity in their areas which made the use and maintenance of technology difficult and commented that, rather than depend upon technology, using traditional oral instructional strategies was more reliable when sharing information.

One participant's comments led to this statement that was presented to the participants in Round Two: "Literate adults who are effective instructors of nonliterate adults are conscious of the needs of nonliterate adult learners when there are also literate adults in the group who monopolize teaching time to proudly demonstrate their literacy" (Thompson, 2015, p. 144). In Round Two, 42% of the participants strongly agreed with this statement and 49% agreed with it. No participants disagreed with the statement.

Conclusion

In this paper, some of the findings of a research study were shared, a study in which 54 experienced literate practitioners responded to 66 statements presented to them in a first round questionnaire. In the second round, only one of the 54 participants did not respond. In this round, the participants were given the opportunity to stand by their responses or change their first round responses. An additional 19 new statements developed from participants' comments were presented to the participants. At the end of Round Two, 93% of the 85 statements had reached consensus.

As stated earlier, findings cannot be generalized to all nonliterate adults or all effective literate instructors of nonliterate adults. However, the fact that 54 practitioners or retired practitioners were easily found who were willing to participate in the study is evidence that there are literates who share information with nonliterate adults in oral cultures without using literacy. A perusal of the participants' demographic information shows that almost all of the participants had at one time taught Bible. While understanding and meeting the learning needs of nonliterate adults has been a topic of study for over 30 years in the Christian mission community, it appears that in academia, research into how best to equip literates to enter oral cultures to share modern information has not been considered. One religious educator remarked, "Anthropologists and missionaries are addressing orality's impact on the teaching–learning process; surprisingly, educators are not" (Marmon, 2013, p. 312).

Just as adult educators in the literate world can agree on general characteristics of their students while at the same time realizing that not all of their students will fit the profile, so the participants in this study were able to reach consensus on the characteristics of their nonliterate students. They also agreed on personal competencies of effective instructors and effective instructional strategies. Key to their findings were the themes of value and respect. Rather than seeing their students as deficient and their nonliteracy as a disease, the participants believed that their effectiveness was directly tied to how much they as teachers respected nonliterates and valued oral cultures. Effective instructors, as literates, were aware of the limitations their literacy created in that most felt they could never truly understand or identify with their nonliterate adult students nor master some of the oral skills their students took for granted.

Surprising in the study was the participants' reaction to local literate translators as well as their teaching experiences when local literate adults and nonliterate adults were taught together. In much of the development world, it appears there is an assumption that speaking the local language is the main criterion for effective communication when an outsider wishes to communicate with an insider. This study suggested that just speaking the local language is not enough and may even be a hindrance, even if the translator is of the same ethnic group. If the translator is literate, he or she must also understand nonliterate adults and treat them with respect. Some participants noted that in their experience, when nonliterate adults were taught in the same group with adults who were literate or becoming literate, the focus often switched from the information being shared

to an opportunity for some adults to showcase their growing literate ability, and nonliterate adults' learning needs remained unmet.

The possibilities for future research on this topic are endless. Research comparing the results of projects that meet nonliterate adults' learning needs and those that do not are needed. Research is needed to evaluate whether giving nonliterate adults access to information using oral strategies empowers these nonliterate adults to act on the information.

International development projects must be systematically evaluated to see if they are "nonliterate friendly." Local governments must evaluate their adult education programs to see if they are actually sharing information or are instead spending time and resources sharing a learning method. The world has not yet seen what might happen when literacy is no longer the gatekeeper to modern information.

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