



Oral Bible Translation as a Means of Enhancing Bible Engagement in Oral Communities: A Survey of Rural Congregations of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, Nkhoma Synod in Malawi

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Corresponding author: Maxwell Chiwoko Banda

Address: Nkhoma University – Theology, Post Office Box 38, Nkhoma, Lilongwe, Malawi

Email: maxwellchiwoko@yahoo.com

Oral Bible Translation as a Means of Enhancing Bible Engagement in Oral Communities: A Survey of Rural Congregations of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, Nkhoma Synod, in Malawi

Maxwell Chiwoko Banda

Nkhoma University, Malawi

Abstract

More than one hundred years of Bible translation in Malawi with a primary focus on the production of written versions has left behind those who have an oral orientation, negatively affecting Bible engagement in most rural communities. This study reports on a survey that was done in rural congregations of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, Nkhoma Synod, in Malawi, on the levels of Bible engagement and the viability of oral Bible translation. Before presenting the results of the survey, the study appraises the history of Bible translation in Malawi for the purpose of highlighting the communication gap left by written Bible translations. A discussion of both scholarly and biblical materials establishes the need for oral Bible translation.

Keywords

Oral Bible Translation, Bible Engagement, Malawi, Church of Central Africa Presbyterian Nkhoma Synod

Bible translation in Malawi has primarily focused on production of written text. While the purpose of Bible translation is to allow every human language access to the Word of God (Barrick 2019), the existence of the Bible in written versions has made the Bible foreign to people of oral orientation from various language groups in Malawi. This has resulted in poor Bible engagement in rural communities, which are predominantly oral. The central argument of this paper is that Bible translation in Malawi must also focus on Oral Bible Translation (OBT) even in languages with written Bible versions. This argument presumes that OBT has the potential to enhance Bible engagement in rural areas, where information access and sharing is done orally. The study begins with a brief review of the history of Bible translation in Malawi for the purpose of highlighting the communication gap created by written Bible versions. Both scholarly and biblical materials are then discussed in order to establish the necessity of OBT. Thereafter, the results of a survey conducted among rural congregations of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), Nkhoma Synod, on levels of Bible engagement and the possibility of OBT in Malawi are presented.

History of Bible translation in Malawi

Printed translations

Bible translation in Malawi was pioneered by the Scottish Missionaries in the 1880s because they believed that translating the Bible into local languages would help in the spread of Christianity. In 1893, a team was set apart to work on Bible translation, and in 1900, missionaries from Blantyre Missions, Livingstonia Mission, Dutch Reformed Church Missions, and Zambezi Industrial Missions formed a Bible Translation commission to review the Chichewa New Testament translation of David Clement Scott before it was universalized in all Chichewa speaking regions (Bible Society of Malawi 2022). The whole Bible was completed in 1919 with the first printing done in 1922. This version was called *Buku Lopatulika ndilo Mawu a Mulungu* “The Sacred Book is the Word of God” (Pauw 1980, 216). Orthographical revision was done in 1936, 1966, 2014, and 2018 (Wendland 1998, 23; Bible Society of Malawi 2018, ii).

Because the *Buku Lopatulika* was mainly a Protestant enterprise, in 1966, the Roman Catholic Church published the *Malembo Oyera* “Holy Writings” Chichewa version targeting Catholics in Malawi. For ecumenical reasons, the Bible Society of Malawi (BSM) engaged scholars from both Protestant and Roman Catholic churches to translate a new Chichewa Bible. This translation included the deuterocanonical books and was based on spoken Chichewa. The NT was published in 1977 and the whole Bible in 1999 (Wendland 1998, 29–32). This translation was called *Buku Loyera* “The Holy Book.”

In 2017, in response to language change that made the Chichewa of the *Buku Lopatulika* outdated, Biblica International launched another Chichewa Bible version called *Mawu a Mulungu mu Chichewa Chalero* “The Word of God in Contemporary Chichewa.” The translation was done over a period of thirty years to meet the need for a more simplified Chichewa Bible version in contemporary Chichewa (Biblica 2016, iii).

Bible translation in the Chiyawo language started in the late 1870s by missionaries from Universities’ Mission to Central Africa and Blantyre Missions. Missionaries from different mission agencies joined the translation team and completed the Old Testament in 1920 (Houston 2022, 9–10). Unfortunately, the early Chiyawo Bible translation was not finished and the products of the translation project ended up in archives. The Chiyawo Bible that is currently in use was translated by BSM with the first publication of some NT portions in the 1980s. The final version of the Chiyawo Bible, called *Buku Jeswela* “Holy Bible” was published in 2014 (*Buku Jeswela* 2014).

BSM also worked on Bible translations in other languages: Tumbuka (1952, 1981, 2017), Tonga (1986), Ngonde (1992), Sena Common Language Bible (2005), Chilomwe Common Bible (2019) (Bible Society of Malawi 2023). Currently two thirds of Malawi’s languages have written Bible translations.

Communication gaps of written Bible translations

It is widely agreed that most African societies have oral cultures (Ngugi wa Thiong’o 1986; Tuwe 2016; Femi, Akibu, and Peter 2017; Iheanacho 2021), meaning that “learning, teaching, and communication in general occur through oral medium, rather than through the medium of printed text” (Floor 2021, 2). Christianity in Malawi, as is the case in some other African countries, came from the Western world where the Bible has long existed in written versions (Floor 2021, 1). The Western missionaries introduced formal education and developed, codified, and worked on orthographies for local languages as a means of preparing the local people to be able to read the Bible in their own languages (Kamwendo 1998, 32). Even though some languages have developed writing systems, there are still many people who do not know how to read and write. For instance, there are many speakers of Chiyawo and Chilomwe who do not use their Bible translations because they do not know how to read their languages (Houston 2022, 9). This is why, in many communities that are largely Lomwe and Yawo, Chichewa Bible translations are used in services of worship (Samson Mseu, interview by author November 15, 2023). By focusing on the production of written translations, Bible translation in Malawi has left a communication gap for people with oral orientation.

Audio versions

In addressing the communication gap left by written Bible translations, BSM started production of audio versions of existing Bible translations in the 1990s: Chichewa audio NT (1996), followed by Sena audio NT (2003), Tumbuka audio NT (2004), a dramatized audio NT in Chichewa (2006), and a dramatized audio NT in Chiyawo (2007) (Bible Society of Malawi 2023). In 2016, BSM published audio versions of *Buku Lopatulika* and the Chiyawo Bible (Bible Society of Malawi 2016). More recently, Faith Comes by Hearing produced audio versions of *Mawu a Mulungu mu Chichewa Chalero*, a dramatized Chilomwe NT, and the Lambyia NT.

Problems of audio Bibles

The main problem with the existing audio versions is that they are merely word-for-word readings of the existing written Bible translations. Unfortunately, these translations were not made with an awareness of the oral features of the biblical or target languages. Describing an audio Bible, Koh (2020) says, “an audio delivery would be a Bible open in front of a reader with a microphone in front of them and they are reading what has been written down in text.” This description of an audio Bible points at one of the major problems of audio Bibles, that is, their failure to address the oral needs of oral cultures. Maxey (2009) contends that the message of the Bible in Africa cannot be contextualized if, among other things, Bible translation does not take into account the fact that there are some cultures that prefer oral communication.

Bridging the gap

Beginning in the early 21st century, scholars in the field of Bible translation proposed Oral Bible translation (OBT) as a way of bridging the communication gap left by both written and audio Bibles (Floor 2021; Alexander 2021; Amshi 2023). In their article “Reanimating Orality,” Naudé and Makutoane study the possibility of having a new Bible translation that would address the oral aspect of the Southern Sotho people. They found that even though church leaders read Bibles aloud for the people, the word-for-word translation approach used in the translations makes it difficult for people to remember the contents read to them. In their view, an oral Bible would be ideal to address these problems as it would take into account the oral aspects of both the source and target languages (Naudé and Makutoane 2006, 723–24, 737). Koh (2020) writes, “what we’re ultimately trying to do in OBT is create a natural delivery—the way people use their language in a local culture as a way to deliver Scripture, something that is faithful to the original text but in a very natural delivery that people would be able to understand completely and respond to.”

Oral Bible translation

OBT and its history

OBT is a method of translating the Bible that takes into account the oral aspect of the biblical culture and seeks to produce Bibles that are in line with the oral aspect of target languages (Cleaver 2023, 6). Calls for OBT started in the last half of the 20th century as this was thought to be an effective way of making the Bible accessible to communities that primarily depend on spoken methods of communication (Toler 2020, 53–54; Macalinao 2022, 8). As a method of Bible translation, OBT takes into account how oral communities process and share information. Describing OBT in contrast with audio Bibles, Frost, Mustin, and Beal (2023, 2) say that:

OBT isn’t just about reciting words; it’s about bringing the Scriptures to life in a way that resonates with people’s cultural and emotional experiences. When we translate the Scriptures into oral performances, we’re tapping into communication systems that already exist within cultures. This allows us to convey complex aspects of the original texts, such as social dynamics, levels of politeness, and emotions, in a clear and relatable way. What’s more, these performances can recreate the experience of hearing the

Scriptures as they were originally heard. We can translate the letters of the Apostles into stirring sermons, and the Psalms into songs that capture the attention of an entire community.

Cleaver also says, “the process of OBT, including the exegetical discussion, and the product of OBT need to be consistent with oral communication, giving thought to ways that the particular oral community processes information and how that information is communicated” (Cleaver 2023, 6). She identifies features that characterize OBT in contrast to the method used to translate written and to record audio Bibles. The first is emotional exegesis. She says, “the kind of emotions that the characters in the Bible passages may have been experiencing and expressing ... For each story or passage, the team needs to decide which emotions are appropriate to the text and should therefore be expressed in the translation” (2023, 13–14). OBT does not only seek to bring out the appropriate emotions behind every passage, but also pays attention to how the target language expresses those emotions. In this case, oral communicators would not only appreciate the emotions of the biblical narrators but identify with them as they are expressed in a natural way for their language.

Cleaver also identifies voice and performance as other features of OBT. In OBT, it is not just about saying the words, but how the words are said matters the most. The prosodic or performance features must be in line with both the source and target languages (Cleaver 2023, 15–16). The implication here is that oral translation is not simply audio recording of the Bible passages but an oral performance of the message.

Frost, Mustin, and Beal go further in commending OBT by providing the following evidence:

Oral Bible translations have a different impact than audio Bibles. When the Spoken English Bible field tested its translation of Jonah with OBT teams on several continents, the resounding response was that their OBT version of Jonah was far more useful than the audio Bibles the teams were using. Similar results were found in a qualitative study comparing a draft of Luke 15 produced by the Spoken English Bible translation team to a professionally produced audio Bible—participants who heard the OBT version remembered much longer stretches of the passage and could more accurately reason about its theological content. (Frost, Mustin, and Beal 2023, 3)

From this discussion, it can be concluded that the audio Bibles that currently exist in Malawi lack features that are crucial for oral Bibles. While the growing need for Bible translation in Malawi, and the rest of Africa, has been motivated by the desire to have all cultures evangelized (Mojola 2002), the communication gap left by both written and audio Bibles means this evangelistic goal is not fully actualized.

A biblical basis for OBT

The question as to whether OBT has a biblical basis has been discussed by biblical scholars (Voth 2005; Hwang 2016; De Regt 2013). An investigation of oral features in the Bible reveals that both written and oral systems of communication were used in the transmission of the message in different periods (Schaper 2015, 332–33). While there has been a scholarly debate about the development of writing and the extent of the dichotomy between orality and writing in ancient Israel (Schniedewind 2005; Carr 2011; Miller 2015; Schaper 2015), it is agreed that the culture of ancient Israel was oral and that some of the biblical texts reflect elements of orality (Niditch 1996, 88). Schniedewind argues that the words of some of the texts of the Old Testament were originally given orally, passed on from one generation to another orally, and composed as written texts at a later stage (Schniedewind 2005, 11; see also Hwang 2016, 20). Person (2010, 65; see also Person 1998, 602) expounds this argument by pointing out that even when the writing system was developed, the majority of the Israelite population did not depend on written sources in their everyday life.

In Deuteronomy 6.7-8, God commanded the Israelites to memorize his commands and to “talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you

rise” (Deut 6.7).¹ While v. 8 may be interpreted as an indication of written communication (Niditch 1996, 100), the verb *דַּבַּר* in v. 7, translated in ESV as “talk,” interpreted in the context of the book of Deuteronomy, means recitation (Carr 2005, 135). Construed as a whole, Deuteronomy 6.7-8 reveals that oral and written modes of communication complimented each other in the transmission of the biblical message. Throughout the book of Deuteronomy (Deut 11.19-20, 31.19-22), the complimentary nature of oral and writing as modes of keeping and remembering God’s commands is maintained (Person 2010, 53–54; Carr 2005, 135).

Most Psalms were composed to be used orally as songs of worship in ancient Israel’s religious practices (Dickie 2017, 1; Carr 2005, 154), as evidenced by all the musical terminology in the book. Note also that many Psalms summon the people of God to sing to the Lord (e.g. Ps 33.4, 42.9, 137.3; 149.1).

It is also widely accepted among scholars that most prophetic oracles were delivered orally (Voth 2005, 118; Stell 2022, 411–12). For example, on many occasions, Jeremiah delivered his prophetic oracles orally, not in written form (Jer 7.25-26). Even when he had the prophetic oracle recorded by Baruch, the message was delivered to the king(s) orally (Jer 36.1-3, 50-51). Moreover, occasions when the prophet was commanded by God to deliver the message in dramatic acts are also instances when the message was delivered to the people of Israel orally (Jer 7.29-31; 18.1-12, 19, 27; see also Ezek 5). In her book *The Great Drama of Jeremiah: A Performance Reading*, Billingham (2021; see also Cleaver 2023, 15–16) demonstrates that dramatic scenes in the book of Jeremiah are proof of the books’ oral background.

In the New Testament, too, we can see an interplay between oral and written modes of communication. Even though the gospels exist today in a written form, their early contents were delivered orally by Jesus during his earthly ministry. The oral traditions of the early church also helped in the composition of the gospels (Kelber 1983). An indication of this may be the use of the historical present tense in the Synoptic Gospels (Elder 2018; Niedergall 2020; Nessa 1978). In his study of Paul’s letter to Philemon, Maxey (2009) identifies several linguistic features that point to oral performance of the text. One of the features he identifies is similar sound patterns (v. 25), which signifies to him that the text was composed with an oral audience in mind for easy memorization and performance. It can be concluded from this discussion that OBТ has a Scriptural basis.

Survey of Bible engagement and viability of OBТ among rural congregations of the CCAP Nkhoma Synod

Based on the assumption that OBТ can serve as a means for enhancing Bible engagement in oral communities, a survey was done among the rural congregations of the CCAP Nkhoma Synod for the purposes of establishing the levels of Bible engagement and establishing the viability of OBТ in Malawi. Since there is no oral Bible version in Malawi, the audio from the Jesus Film was used as an example of OBТ.

CCAP Nkhoma Synod

The CCAP Nkhoma Synod is a mainline protestant church in Malawi. It is predominantly present in the central region of Malawi, with few congregations in the southern and northern regions and in South Africa. Nkhoma Synod was founded by Dutch missionaries in 1889 (Pauw 1980, 44). As of 2023, Nkhoma Synod had a total of 224 congregations with a membership of 648,414 (Nkhoma Synod 2023). Over eighty percent of Nkhoma Synod churches are in rural areas (Chikondi 2020, 33–44).

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Survey methodology

Design

This study used correlative descriptive design which involved the administration of a structured questionnaire to gather data on the levels of Bible engagement among the members of CCAP Nkhoma Synod in rural congregations. The questionnaire included qualitative questions which were quantified by assigning scores to presupposed answers from which respondents were to select their preference.

Targeted population and sampling

The study targeted CCAP Nkhoma Synod congregations in the central region of Malawi where Chichewa is the main language of communication. Due to the size of the target geographical area, the study used combined cluster and purposive sampling methods. Each congregation was marked as a cluster on its own. The study purposively selected 24 congregations.² Only rural congregations were selected because it was assumed that oral communication is used more exclusively in rural areas than in urban areas.

Using Yamane's formula $n = N / (1 + N(e)^2)$, where n = sample size, N = sample frame, and e = margin of error (Yamane 1967, 886). The study had a sample frame of 620,486. At a margin of error of 3.5%, the formula dictates a sample size of 816. The sample size was increased to 866 to boost the confidence level because some congregations which were selected did not participate in the study due to financial and communication constraints. On average, 36 members of each congregation participated in the survey.

Data collection instruments and administration

The survey used a structured questionnaire to collect data among the members of the CCAP Nkhoma Synod. The questionnaires were administered by field data experts. A different type of structured questionnaire was submitted to BSM to gather data about the existing Bible translations in Malawi.

Data analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used to process and analyze the data that was collected. The analysis used the descriptive method to find frequencies and correlations between variables through cross-tabulation.

Ethical considerations

The research design and data collection from all target populations were carried out according to ethical considerations. Before administering the questionnaires in congregations, consent was obtained from the pastors responsible in the congregations that participated in the survey.

² These congregations are: (1) Lilongwe District: Chipanga CCAP, Nkhoma CCAP, Mchizanjala CCAP, Mthandiza CCAP, Mtenthera CCAP, Mtaika CCAP, Kawira CCAP, and Chowo CCAP (2) Ntchisi District: Kanjiwa CCAP, Chimbiri CCAP, Kasemwe CCAP, and Mphongwe CCAP; (3) Mchinji District: Sopa CCAP, Ulongwe CCAP, and Mponda CCAP; (4) Dedza District: Mkundi CCAP, Makungubwi CCAP, Mankhamba CCAP, and Chitundu CCAP; (5) Kasungu District: Mziza CCAP; (6) Dowa District: Chambidzi CCAP, Chamkango CCAP, Bowe CCAP, and Lipiri CCAP.

Results and discussion of findings

Demographic information

Gender of participants

In order to investigate the levels of Bible engagement in rural congregations of CCAP Nkhoma Synod, the study engaged male and female participants in all the congregations that participated in the study. The study had 468 male participants (54%) and 398 female participants (46%).

Age of participants

The study also engaged participants of various ages for the purpose of assessing the levels of Bible engagement among different age groups. Table 1 reports the numbers of participants in each age range. More people of between 15–30 years (426 participants) participated in the study than older adults. The dominance of young participants is attributed to the influence of the convenience sampling method which was used in selecting participants. At the time of data collection, most congregations were holding annual youth conferences. As a result, many youths were available when the data was being collected.

Age Range (Years)	15–19	20–30	31–40	41–55	56–70	71–90
Number of Participants	178	248	171	173	80	16
Percentage	21%	29%	20%	20%	9%	2%

Table 1: Ages of participants surveyed

Cross-tabulation of age range and gender

Table 2 cross-tabulates the gender and age of participants. It can be observed that male participants dominated in most age ranges while female participants were in majority only in the 15–19 years age range. The dominance of male participants in most age ranges can be attributed to the fact that the majority of the participants were male.

Age Range (Years)	15–19	20–30	31–40	41–55	56–70	71–90
Males	76	139	88	99	56	10
Females	102	109	83	74	24	6

Table 2: Cross-tabulation of age range and gender

Bible engagement

Owning a Bible

As a first step towards establishing the levels of Bible engagements among the participants, the study inquired on whether the participants owned a Bible or not. Figure 1 presents a summary of the data. 526 participants (61%) have Bibles while 340 participants (39%) have no Bibles.

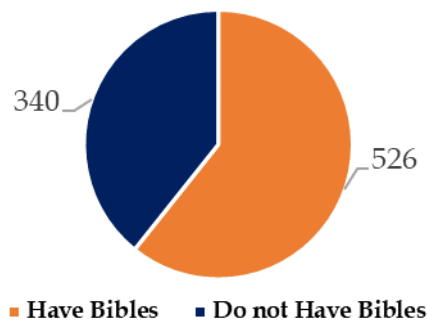


Figure 1: Bible ownership

Cross-tabulation of data on age range and Bible ownership

A cross-tabulation analysis was done between age and Bible ownership. Table 3 presents the findings. The age range with more participants without Bibles is 15–19 years of age, while the majority in all the other age ranges have Bibles. Cumulatively, more youths than adults have no Bibles.

Age Range (Years)	15–19	20–30	31–40	41–55	56–70	71–90
Have Bibles	78	153	116	125	42	12
Have No Bibles	100	95	55	48	38	4

Table 3: Cross-tabulation of age range and Bible ownership

Reasons for not owning a Bible

Participants without Bibles were asked to choose one of three reasons as justification for not having a Bible. Table 4 provides a summary of the findings. 205 participants (60.2%) have no Bibles because of financial problems. 117 participants (34.5%) have no Bibles because they do not know where to buy them. This reason can be justified by the fact that the survey was done in rural areas where there are no bookshops where Bibles are sold. 18 participants (5.3%) were not sure about the reasons for not having a Bible. From these findings, it can be argued that financial problems is the main reason hindering people from owning a Bible. This followed by unavailability of selling points in rural areas.

Reason	Number	Percentage
Financial problems	205	60.2%
Do not know where to buy	117	34.5%
Not certain	18	5.3%

Table 4: Reasons for not owning a Bible

Types of Bibles owned

The study further inquired about the types of Bibles from the participants who had indicated that they have Bibles. Participants were given these options to choose among: (1) hardcopy version, (2) mobile version, and (3) printed and mobile versions. Out of 526 participants who have Bibles, 466 (88.6%) have hardcopy

versions, 50 (9.5%) have hardcopy and mobile versions, and 10 (1.9%) have mobile versions only. Figure 2 illustrates this.

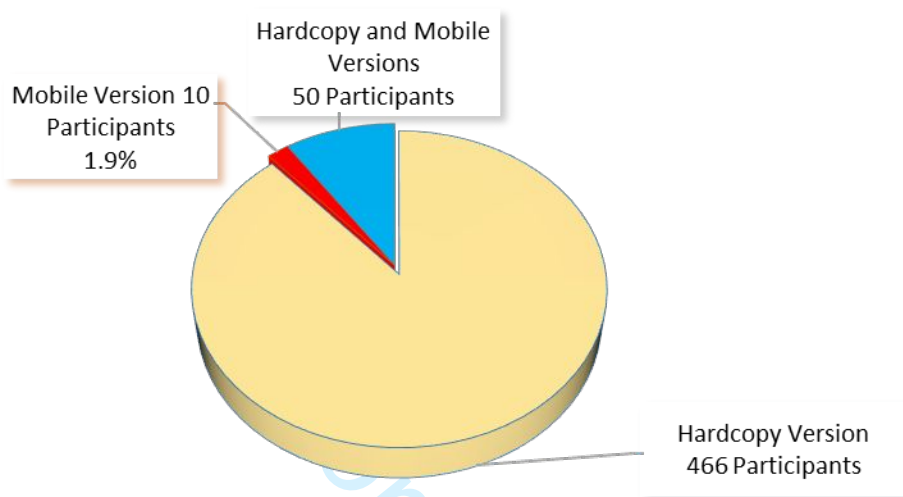


Figure 2: Types of Bibles owned

Most participants have hardcopy Bibles. This can be attributed to the fact that few people in rural areas have smartphones which support mobile Bibles.

Regularity of Bible engagement

From the participants who have Bibles, the study further inquired about the frequency with which they engage with the Bible. The participants were given these options to choose from: (1) at the church only, (2) 1 time a week, (3) 2 to 3 times a week, (4) 4 to 5 times a week, and (5) every day. Figure 3 illustrates the findings. 160 people (30% of those with Bibles) read their Bibles every day, 103 (20%) read their Bibles once a week, 98 (16%) read their Bibles 2 to 3 times a week, 83 (16%) read their Bibles 4 to 5 times a week, and 82 (16%) read their Bibles at the church only. Comparing the frequency of Bible engagement per week with 7 as a total number of days per week, it can be said that those who engage with the Bible for less than 4 days do not engage with their Bibles on a regular basis while those who engage with their Bible for 4 times or more do have regular engagements. From this, it can be deduced that the majority of participants who have Bibles, that is, 283 of the 526 participants (55%), do not engage with their Bibles on a regular basis.

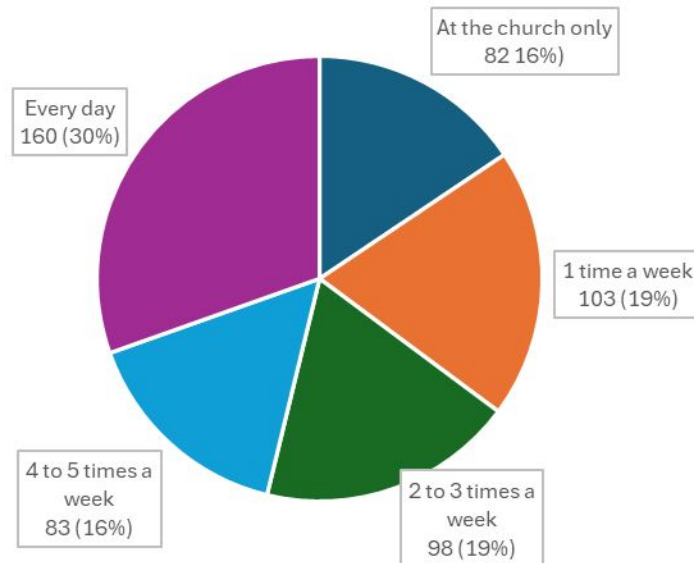


Figure 3: Regularity of Bible engagement

If we put those who read their Bibles at the church only (82 participants) into the same category with those who do not have Bibles (340 participants) it gives a total of 422 participants (49%). That is, almost half of the participants do not have any Bible engagement outside of church.

Reasons for irregular Bible engagement

Participants who indicated that they either engage with their Bibles at church only or once a week were asked to give a reason as to why they don't engage with the Bible more frequently. Figure 4 illustrates the findings. 146 participants (52%) reported that they do not engage with their Bibles more because they do not like reading, 123 participants (43%) have busy schedules, while 14 participants (5%) were not certain about the reason. From these findings it can be concluded that the majority of participants do not engage with their Bibles because they do not like reading.

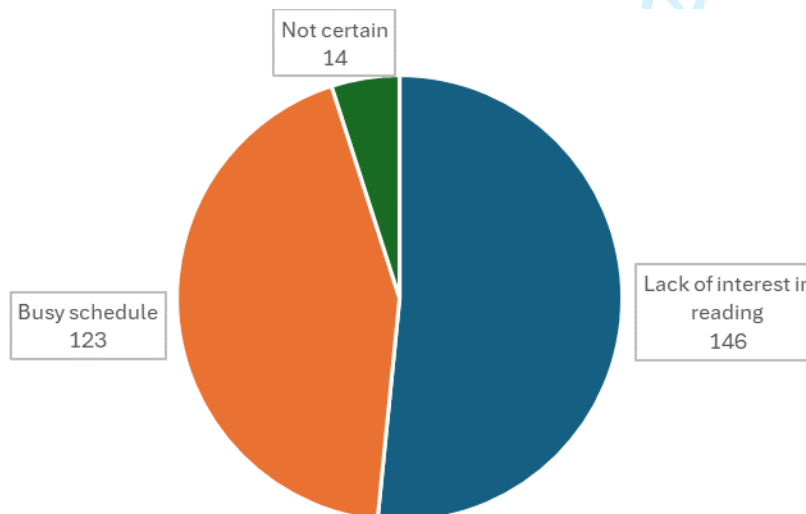


Figure 4: Reasons for irregular Bible engagement

Viability of OBТ in Malawi

Preferred mode of accessing/sharing information

As one way of assessing the viability of oral Bible versions in Malawi, the study inquired from the participants about their mode of preference for accessing and sharing information. The participants were asked to choose between reading and listening. This inquiry was based on two assumptions: first, that those who prefer the listening mode are more likely to have problems engaging with written Bible versions, and second, that those who prefer listening would want an oral Bible version. The findings revealed that 489 participants (56%) chose reading as their preferred mode of accessing information while 377 participants (44%) said listening is their mode of preference of accessing information. This is illustrated in Figure 5.

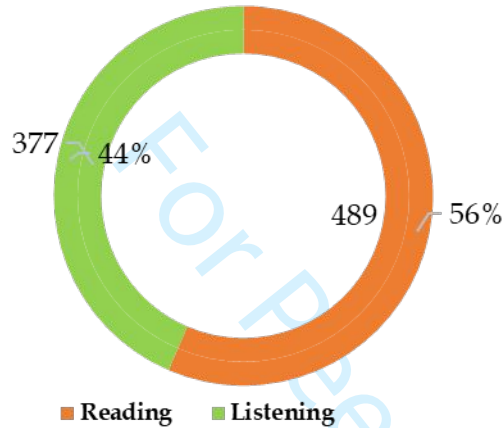


Figure 5: Preferred mode of accessing and sharing

Even though the findings show that the majority of participants chose reading as their preferred mode of accessing information, the percentage of those who prefer listening is high enough to consider an oral Bible version.

Cross-tabulation of Bible engagement regularity and information accessing/sharing mode

A cross-tabulation of data was done to assess the correlation between the preferred modes of accessing information and the regularity of Bible engagement. Those who have no Bible have also been included. The data in Table 5 shows that the majority of those who engage with the Bible at the church only or once a week prefer listening for accessing/sharing information. The majority of those who read the Bible two or more times per week prefer reading over listening. On the other hand, 61% of those who do not own a Bible prefer listening over reading. Thus, it can be inferred that those who like accessing information through listening do not read their Bibles on frequently while those who prefer reading do read their Bibles frequently. It can be argued that there is a correlation between one's mode of preference for accessing/sharing information and frequency of Bible engagement in both written and oral formats.

Bible Reading Frequency	Reading	Listening	Total
At the Church Only	32	50	82
Once a Week	42	61	103
Two to Three Times a Week	77	21	98
Four to Five Times a Week	59	24	83

Everyday	129	31	160
Without Bibles	131	209	340
Total	489	377	866

Table 5: Collerational analysis

Exposure to Jesus Film

Since there is no oral Bible version in any of the languages in Malawi, the audio of the Jesus Film was used as a substitute for an oral Bible version. Participants were asked whether they had ever watched or listened to the film. The study found that 830 participants (95.8%) had knowledge about the film while 36 participants (4.2%) did not know anything about the film.

The need for OB T

Participants with knowledge of the Jesus Film were asked on whether they would endorse an oral Bible version. 708 participants (81.8%) agreed that there is a need for an oral Bible version in Malawi. 158 participants (19.2%) said that they do not endorse an oral Bible version. These findings suggest that there is a need for an oral Bible version to supplement the existing written Bible versions.

Summary of findings

Bible Engagement in Rural Areas

Regarding Bible engagement, the study has found that:

1. Many Christians in rural areas do not have Bibles because of financial problems and lack of purchasing opportunities in rural areas.
2. Young people form a majority of Christians without Bibles.
3. The majority of Christians in rural areas do not engage with the Bible frequently because they either have no Bibles or do not like reading.

Viability of OB T in Malawi

The study has established that there is a need for OB T in Malawi because:

1. The majority of Christians who prefer accessing/sharing information orally either have no Bibles or have irregular engagement with their Bibles.
2. There are many Christians in rural areas who do not know how to read.
3. OB T has potential to improve Bible engagement in rural areas.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, this study makes the following recommendations.

CCAP Nkhoma Synod and other churches in Malawi

1. Should have programs that will encourage corporate and family/individual Bible study, especially among the youth.
2. Should negotiate with bookshops to open Bible selling points in rural congregations.
3. Should find means of subsidizing the prices of Bibles to its members or find organizations that distribute free Bibles to those who are financially needy.

Bible Translation Agencies in Malawi

1. Should start OBT projects in Malawi for languages both with and without the Bible.
2. Should consider having programs of selling Bibles at subsidized prices for lower income earners.

Conclusion

This paper has presented an overview of the history of Bible translation in Malawi in which it was observed that the approaches to Bible translation which focused on the production of written and audio Bibles left a communication gap. This communication gap has contributed to poor Bible engagement in rural areas as evident in the survey that was done in rural congregations of the CCAP Nkhoma Synod. Based on the findings of the survey and the examination of both scholarly and biblical materials, the study concludes that there is a need for OBT projects in Malawi as this has the potential to enhance Bible engagement in rural areas, which are predominantly oral.

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