



RESEARCH

Healthy Bible Translation Programs: Successful L1 Scripture Engagement in Previously L2 Dominant Churches

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This article responds to Anonby, et al, through a systematic review of eighteen separate Scripture Engagement studies that examined seventy-three distinct language communities in twelve countries on four continents. In sixty of these seventy-three language groups, languages of wider communication (L2) exclusively dominated Sunday morning Bible readings, but the churches switched to using vernacular language (L1) for Sunday morning Bible readings after the completion of vernacular language Bible translations (VLBT). Some of the studies included in this systematic review are large studies that, like the Sulawesi study, focus on multiple languages in a single country or region (Konfe-Tiendrébéogo, et al 2014; Ndemba 2025; Van den Berg 2017), while others are studies looking at one or two languages in greater detail. All of these studies show a similar trajectory of established churches that had previously adopted a language of wider communication later switching to using vernacular language Bible translations. This systematic review identifies the Scripture Engagement strategies implemented in the various contexts that contributed to the success of these Bible translation programs and the lack of Scripture Engagement activities in the Bible translation projects that were unused.

Introduction

Vernacular language Bible translations around the world are being used by individuals and churches and contributing to spiritual growth according to this systematic review of Scripture Engagement research. This finding is significant because of the unfortunate phenomenon that not all vernacular language Bible translations are well used. Recent research by Anonby, Eberhard, and Simanjuntak (2024) revisits this topic by seeking to document limited of Scripture use in a number of Bible translation projects in Sulawesi, Indonesia. It has long been known that vernacular Bible translation programs that forgo significant Scripture Engagement activities are likely to be under-used or unused (Aldridge 2018, 99–104; T. W. Dye 1985; Landin 1990; Van den Berg et al. 2017). The Sulawesi Research is important because it serves as a reminder of the complexities leading to successful Scripture Engagement. However, it provides an incomplete picture because it does not include projects where vernacular language Bible translation (VLBT) has led to successful Scripture Engagement. The Sulawesi research investigates whether vernacular language (L1) Bible translations are infrequently (or never) adopted in churches where a language of wider communication (L2)

Bible had been previously adopted. They suggest that once a church has adopted a language of wider communication, vernacular language Bible translations will not be adopted in church domains.

This article responds to Anonby *et al.*, through a systematic review of eighteen separate Scripture Engagement studies that examined seventy-three distinct language communities in twelve countries on four continents. In sixty of these seventy-three language groups, languages of wider communication (L2) exclusively dominated Sunday morning Bible readings, but the churches switched to using vernacular language (L1) for Sunday morning Bible readings after the completion of vernacular language Bible translations (VLBT). Some of the studies included in this systematic review are large studies that, like the Sulawesi study, focus on multiple languages in a single country or region (Konfe-Tiendrébéogo, Kimbung, and Engeler 2014; Ndemba 2025; Van den Berg et al. 2017), while others are studies looking at one or two languages in greater detail. All of these studies show a similar trajectory of established churches that had previously adopted a language of wider communication later switching to using vernacular language Bible translations. This systematic review identifies the Scripture Engagement strategies implemented in the various contexts that contributed to the success of these Bible translation programs and the lack of Scripture Engagement activities in the Bible translation projects that were unused.

Responding to the Sulawesi Research

Complexity in Bible Translation

Anonby, Eberhard, and Simanjuntak's research (2024) helpfully uses the lens of diglossia to highlight the complexity of communities' everyday language use. More specifically, it examines the language domain of church to investigate the sociolinguistic trends within this social setting. While there are multiple concerns about their research design and consequent results—sampling, baseline for the photography tool, misinterpretation of contextual cultural dynamics—this article limits its exploration to how the RQs from the Sulawesi Research are answered in other diglossic contexts and whether diglossia alone is sufficient to explain complex social, cultural, and religious situations. The Sulawesi Research is not unique in its use of diglossia and other sociolinguistic tools to understand Bible translation programs. Scripture Engagement as an academic discipline has a long tradition of leveraging concepts from sociolinguistics, including diglossia (Clark 1986; Duke 1996; T. Dye 2009; Grimes 1988; Hochstetler and Tillinghast 1996; Kindell 1994; Harris 1997; Hatcher 2013; Hatcher and Son 2022; Hatcher 2025; Hatfield and Lewis 1996; Hill 1996; Kindell 1996; Nida 1996; Ommani 2012, 2021; Slocum 1987; Walker 1994; Whitby 1989). In Wayne Dye's *Eight Conditions of Scripture Engagement* (2009), Condition 1 – Appropriate Language examines language stability, community domains of language use, language prestige, and domains of church language use. SIL

Global's Multilingualism, Urbanization, and Scripture Engagement (MUSE) Initiative is perhaps the most publicly visible example of the long dialogue between Scripture Engagement and sociolinguistics. However, the insistence of Anonby, et al on using only one theoretical lens, diglossia, to analyze highly complex issues like Scripture Engagement is problematic because of the potential of missing significant influences on levels of use.

One positive contribution of the Sulawesi Research is a detailed examination of a number of languages in a particular language context, and it offers some unique sociolinguistic insights. In the unabridged version of the study, Anonby, Eberhard, and Simanjuntak identify “scenarios of resistance,” as a significant predictor in positive VLBT use in some circumstances. “Scenarios of resistance” is an idea that appears to build on Eberhard’s “perceived grievances” in his Identity Construction Factors model (2018); it contributes original and helpful thinking on several forces influencing language choice in communities’ language domains including various church domains.

Scripture Engagement as Public Church Bible Reading

Another emphasis of the Sulawesi Research is the focus on public reading of Scripture in Christian worship services – public church Bible reading (PCBR). This emphasis can be helpful, but it is also limiting. The importance of PCBR is that it is the social setting where the largest number of people are exposed to the Bible, and, as such, it should also be the most communicative. The Bible should be well understood since this is when the largest number of people will encounter it on a weekly basis.

The PCBR metric, while useful, is limiting because of the many other domains of church Scripture use beyond PCBR. PCBR is not held as an exclusive metric for success within the field of Scripture Engagement. In multilingual churches, for example, with four or more languages, PCBR in every language is impractical; in such contexts, language specific Sunday schools, small groups, or audio listening groups are the primary social contexts of engagement (Hatcher 2018, 175–195).

Anonby et al, following Paul Frank’s article (2007), quote Harriet Hill (2000) as justification for using PCBR as the primary metric for successful Scripture Engagement. In her article, Hill says,

We can consider the SU [Scripture Use] task finished successfully when...church leaders use the existing translated Scriptures in situations where formerly they translated orally from a language of wider communication. If this goal is not met, we cannot say that we have succeeded in Scripture use. (2000, 84)

However, she goes on to qualify this by providing the more nuanced perspective commonly held within the field of Scripture Engagement:

We must admit that there are situations where a language of wider communication is necessary and good. We can consider the Scripture use finished successfully when...at least two domains of vernacular Scripture use are established in the life of the church. (2000, 84)

In fact, Hill's article suggests a list of ten "Project Level SU Goals" whereby translators can evaluate whether or not Scripture Engagement has been successful in their language project. This metric used in the Sulawesi Research is the second within the list of ten (2000, 84). It is unclear why Anonby et al do not discuss any of the other measures.

Hill's perspective, like most in the field of Scripture Engagement, recognizes all church domains as valuable and does not restrict measures of successful SE to a single domain of use like PCBR. Including all church domains as a metric for Scripture Engagement provides a more accurate measure of the level of use in any particular context. The Sulawesi Research methodology should expand their methodology to include all church domains.

The Reason for this Response Article

The reason for this response article is that the Sulawesi Research creates an incomplete picture of Scripture Engagement. While lack of use is a reality, it is not universal. Levels of use are significantly affected by Scripture Engagement activities that empower local communities to make their own Scripture Engagement decisions. The Sulawesi Research does not address this. The Sulawesi Research is also limited because it restrictively uses diglossia as its only theoretical lens of interpretation thus neglecting the interdisciplinary nature of Scripture Engagement.

Their primary research question is the following:

RQ 1: Do vernacular Scriptures in Sulawesi become the/a normative text for public reading in public worship after national language Scriptures have filled that role?

Their answer to this research question "has been negative." This response article will maintain the first two of Anonby, Eberhard, and Simanjuntak's RQs, while adding a different RQ in place of their third.

Systematic Review of L1 Scripture Engagement Research in Previously L2 Churches

Research Questions

RQ 1: Do vernacular Scriptures become the/a normative text for public reading in public worship after national language Scriptures have filled that role?

Two secondary research questions follow:

RQ 2: If so, when and under what conditions?

RQ 3: In what additional church domains is use high beyond Public Church Bible Reading?

This study provides primary research in the form of a systematic review of Scripture Engagement research in contexts where L2 had previously been exclusively dominant in church SE domains and subsequently L1 was used in one or more church domain.

Anonby, Eberhard, and Simanjuntak's research evaluated this RQ 1 and, in the longer version, RQ 2, which I will also evaluate in my systematic review. However, I will also be looking at the RQ 3 that is listed above as I believe it is more relevant than theirs.¹

Nature of Systematic Review Research Methodology

Systematic reviews are studies of studies and are considered a primary tool in establishing evidence-based practice. They are at the top of many evidence hierarchies because they provide the most comprehensive and unbiased summary of available research evidence on a topic. They are frequently used to provide a consensus view of what current research demonstrates, collectively in answer to specific research questions. Systematic reviews aim to comprehensively locate, critically appraise, and synthesize research that bears on a particular question, using organized, transparent, and replicable procedures at each step in the process (Littell, Corcoran, and Pillai 2008). This systematic review has endeavored to be comprehensive. To this end, rigorous searches were conducted in the following areas or using the following methodologies:

- Searching Jed Carter's [Scripture Engagement Research Compendium \(SERC\)](#);
- [Scripture-Engagement.org](#) research archive;
- Searching missiological journals: The Bible Translator, Missiology, International Bulletin of Missionary Research, International Journal of Frontier Missions, Global Missiology;
- Searching SIL's Notes on Scripture-in-Use internal journal;

¹ Their RQ #3 in the longer version of their research is "How prevalent is this pattern?" This systematic review has chosen to address another research question.

- Conducting Pro-Quest searches for additional theses or dissertations;
- Conducting AI assisted searches for additional sources; and
- Contacting personnel from multiple Bible agencies.

This study relied on archival research with occasional direct queries addressed to authors of studies when specific data points were ambiguous. The only exception is a previously unpublished interview with John Ommani (2025) designed to discover additional information on some languages included in his dissertation research (2012).

Criteria for Inclusion or Exclusion

The primary inclusion/exclusion factor is defined by RQ 1: Do vernacular Scriptures become the/a normative text for public reading in public worship after national language Scriptures have filled that role? As such, this search focused on studies that have measured vernacular language Bible translations (VLBT) in contexts where a language of wider communication was previously dominant in the domain of church and subsequently, vernacular language Bible translations VLBTs were used in church in one or more domains of use including PCBR. As such the following kinds of studies were excluded:

- Studies that examine languages of wider communication;
- Studies of individual languages that measure levels of use in previously non-Christian areas where VLBT and church planting were concurrent, or the church was planted after the completion of the VLBT;
- Scripture Engagement research that did not focus on levels of use;
- Studies that look at other aspects of Bible translation not directly related to Scripture Engagement.

Quality Assessment

This systematic review incorporates a number of studies that were different in design from one another, one of the common goals of systematic reviews. The specific measures of quality employed here were developed around efforts to answer the research questions effectively (Valentine 2009, 135–141). The strongest methodologies for determining Scripture Engagement in PCBR are as follows:

1. Participants observation

2. Mixed methods (which in this study always includes participant observation)
3. Random sample survey

Several additional studies were assessed as of moderate quality. They used the following methodologies:

4. Snowball sampling
5. Convenience sampling

A few studies were assessed as having low quality. The reason for designating them as such is that no specific research methodologies were described. Each of these reports (Clark 1986; Foreman 1991; Slocum 1987) were produced by Bible translators who lived within the research context for over a decade, far longer than researchers typically spend in a context. As such, their observations might be of the highest quality of all (Simons 2021) although I do not give them this designation. Studies with higher quality should be given additional weight. All of the studies here are of high enough quality to be included in this systematic review.

All other studies included are supervised or peer-reviewed primary research including journal articles, organization sponsored research, theses, and dissertations. Almost all of the research cases used participant observation of large numbers of churches within a language community. The ones that did not use participant observation used randomized sampling of a large number of churches.

Additional Indicators of Reliability

The reliability of several studies included in this systematic review (Kome 2021; Konfe-Tiendrébéogo, Kimbung, and Engeler 2014; Ndemba 2025; Trudell 2004) is strengthened by the duplication of languages studied. Four languages in Cameroon (Bum, Lamnso', Ngaomba, Oku) were included in two different studies: the *Transforming Nations Impact Survey* (2014) and *SURAM Cameroon* (2025) conducted over ten years apart by different researchers using unique but comparable methodologies. The results showed similar PCBR rates between three of these four languages (Bum, Lamnso', Ngaomba). Oku showed a significant increase in PCBR from the 2014 study to the 2025 study. This increase among the Oku was concurrent with additional Scripture Engagement activities and is likely a result of these. One of these four languages, Lamnso', was studied by a third researcher (Trudell 2004); there was some variation in the level of use, but all three

of the studies examining Lamnso' confirmed significant PCBR². Another language included in the *SURAM Cameroon* study, Akoose, was also studied by a second researcher (Kome 2021); both studies reported nearly identical levels of PCBR. Four different research studies using unique but comparable methodologies arrived at similar results; this consistency of findings indicates the reliability of each of these particular studies included within this systematic review.

Findings of the Systematic Review

This study systematically reviewed eighteen research studies that examined seventy-three language programs. Sixty of the seventy-three were successful: L1 Scripture Engagement was reported in one or more church language domain in churches where L2 was previously dominant. Twelve language groups continued to use a language of wider communication (L2) after the publication of the VLBT. These will be discussed later.

Fifty-eight of the successful projects studied reported use of vernacular language Bible translations for Sunday morning Bible readings in church. Two language projects saw widespread Scripture Engagement in other church domains but not in PCBR; this finding is important and merits later discussion. Most successful VLBT projects also reported the mother tongue Scriptures being used in additional church domains like Sunday school, Bible studies, audio listening groups, songs, personal devotions, radio programs, and catechisms.

(See [Appendix document](#).)

VLBT Projects with Successful PCBR

Fifty-eight language groups reported significant VLBT Scripture Engagement in the domain of PCBR. Most of these also reported use in more than one church domain. Most of these projects included significant Scripture Engagement strategies. Scripture Engagement workshops were the most commonly used activity in successful Bible translation programs. Such workshops facilitate conversations about theological questions about the new translation, whether it is as authoritative as the LWC translation. They also discuss many practical issues like how to handle Scripture Engagement in multilingual churches. Other common Scripture Engagement activities include audio Bibles, audio listening groups, literacy activities, ethnoarts advocacy, trauma healing workshops, and Culture Meets Scripture workshops. This is supported by some of the findings of Anonby, et al. They noted that in four languages—Napu, Behoa, Sangir and Bambam—increased

² Trudell's research was an in-depth examination of the Scripture use practices in four congregations which accounts for the disproportionately high percentage of use in churches observed. It, nevertheless, provides examples where churches moved from using the LWC to using the vernacular, and it provides limited corroboration of the two studies which research the Lamnso' language (Konfé-Tiendrébéogo, Kimbung, and Engeler 2014; Ndemba 2025).

Table 2. Percentage of Scripture Engagement Activities in Successful Projects

Scripture Engagement Activities	Percentage of languages
SE workshops	96%
Audio Bibles	67%
Literacy	67%
Local ownership	59%
Ethnoarts	34%
Distribution	33%
Trauma healing	2%

use appeared to be caused by advocacy from a local “influential leader” or from the translation team. This finding does not agree with their own hypothesis that diglossia issues alone determine language choice in church regardless of Scripture Engagement advocacy.

Ownership ranked lower than one would expect. Scripture Engagement has long contended that local ownership was the most significant factor affecting use of VLBTs. Its lower score simply indicates that it was not measured in some of the studies. Contrastingly, it was the strongest indicator in the *Transforming Nations* research (Konfe-Tiendrébéogo, Kimbung, and Engeler 2014) and a strong component in both SURAM studies (Van den Berg et al. 2017; Ndemba 2025). Nevertheless, the higher scores for Scripture Engagement workshops probably suggest something about the nature of ownership. Ownership is a broader topic than it is currently conceptualized. Local ownership certainly can include co-creation, local leadership of the translation program, high levels of participation, and local funding. This and other studies (Federwitz 2011; Griffis 2011; Hatcher 2025) suggest that efforts toward local ownership should also include a deeper discussion of the Skopos of a translation. It should facilitate discussion with the community on the significant changes related to multilingualism in the local context, the theological view of the Bible (Bibliology), and the theological approaches church (ecclesiology) of the church leaders and members. These too are key components of a healthy, locally owned Bible translation program. Facilitating these conversations with local stakeholders is foundational to effective Scripture engagement.

The data in this systematic review suggests that such transitional Scripture Engagement activities empower local leaders to consider how mother tongue Bible translations might be used to greatest effect in their contexts. These activities are catalytic. They are purpose-designed to pass the baton to local leaders, empowering them to make Scripture Engagement decisions and to manage ongoing the appropriate use of vernacular language Bible translations in their ministry contexts.

Successful VLBT Projects with Unsuccessful PCBR

SIL International recently published an analysis of two successful Bible translation projects under the title, *Making a Difference: Bible Translation among the Dagomba and Konkomba of Northern Ghana* (Sule-Saa and Park 2021). The positive responses to VLBT among the Dagomba and Konkomba (Sule-Saa and Park 2021) challenge Anonby (*et al.*)'s limiting PCBR-only metric of success. Both projects report very healthy use of the VLBTs, but they do not conform to the PCBR-only definition.

DAGOMBA SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

Among the Dagomba, responses indicated limited PCBR, but they also showed that vernacular Scriptures were being used by ministers almost universally in evangelism. The Dagomba also reported vibrant Faith Comes by Hearing (FCBH) audio Bible listening groups, sought-after single players for individuals, and very popular radio programs that are having widespread social benefits within the communities. Listeners report deepening their discipleship, memorizing Scripture, improving their family relationships, and seeing Muslims come to Christ. At one point, limitations to FCBH funding caused the radio program that played the FCBH recording of the Bible to go off the air. Many Christians and Muslims complained, and a Muslim businessman paid to have the program reinstated. While the level of PCBR is low in this group, the large success of the FCBH audio Bible is noteworthy. With a majority of believers interacting with the FCBH audio Bible, Scripture Engagement among the Dagomba should at least be considered moderate, if not high.

KONKOMBA SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

Among the Konkomba, one pastor described how using Likpakpaaln (the VL language among the Konkomba) “has now made the sermons very short and lovely” (Sule-Saa and Park 2021, 165) indicating a change in the sermon styles since the introduction of the VLBT. He went on to describe how prior to the VLBT, he had difficulty communicating theological concepts in English because people did not understand these terms. He now uses Likpakpaaln key terms to communicate theological concepts from Scripture. Another pastor explained how prior to the Bible translation, many mistakes were made by interpreters during the Sunday morning services. Sadly, Sule-Saa reports that “very few Konkomba were interested in the church” (159, 2021). Happily, he goes on to describe the large number of churches that have been planted using the VLBT exclusively since the completion of the translation. The result has been that many more Konkomba have come to Christ. Additionally, he chronicles how the Dagomba and Konkomba use vernacular Scripture in festivals, for guidance, as a moral frame of reference, and to

subvert hegemony. Both groups describe the use of vernacular Scripture to create new worship songs that are sung in all churches, including those with low PCBR.

These two examples are critical because they negatively answer RQ #1 but positively answer RQ #3. They do not report high PCBR, but they do report conversions to Christ, changes in character, many new church plants, and discipleship happening in large numbers of audio Bible listening groups. According to Anonby et al's PCBR-only metric, these projects where many people are coming to Christ as a direct result of Bible translation would be considered failures because they do not conform to their needlessly restrictive metric of success. Sule-Saa also shows that both of these programs also reported a significant rise in language prestige and cultural pride as a direct result of these Bible translation programs. As SIL anthropologist Carol McKinney put in her review of this study, "The Bible in these local languages was redemptive and transformative in many ways," observing that Sule-Saa had demonstrated that these two Bible translations "contributed to the retaining of the local language and culture" (Sule Saa viii, 2021).

Unsuccessful VLBT Projects

Two research projects reported twelve languages in three countries in which there was very low or no use of VLBTs in any domains. Each of these were larger, regional studies in contrast to most of the other studies which looked at one or two languages.

(See [Appendix document, Table 3.](#))

Of the twelve languages with low or no use, those with no audio Bible tended toward no use, while those with some audio tended a little higher. There were two projects in Papua New Guinea that measured contrary to this pattern; both Tano and Lomi had audio Bibles but reported virtually no vernacular language Scripture Engagement. The Sulawesi Research similarly found several projects with audio Bibles but very limited use. This suggests that accessible formats alone do not guarantee use.

The strongest factor reported in all twelve language programs and in all three countries was a lack of local ownership. This was the strongest predictive factor in the *Transforming Nations* research (Konfe-Tiendrébégo, Kimbung, and Engeler 2014) and proved to be a strong predictor in the SURAM PNG (Papua New Guinea) research (Van den Berg et al. 2017). The SURAM PNG research also reported the minimal use of Scripture Engagement workshops in the challenged programs.

Discussion of Systematic Review Findings and Research Questions

The finding of this systematic review disproves Anonby et al's hypothesis that "the factor which has the most predictive value in multilingual communities [was] which language arrived first in the domains" of Bible translation and literacy. Fifty-eight cases where the adoption of vernacular language Bible translations in PCBR was not prevented by the church having previously used a language of wider communication in this domain.

The Sulawesi Research answered this question negatively. This systematic review answers RQ #1 positively. Multiple studies document the extensive use of vernacular language Bible translations during Sunday morning public Bible readings where an LWC previously dominated the church Bible reading domain exclusively.

The answer to RQ #2 shows that vernacular language Scriptures tended to be used where translation teams discussed impediments with end users. They facilitated discussions on the internal discomfort people had with changing from a traditional, poorly understood Bible translation to a new one. Such changes represent changes to established traditions in societies where tradition is highly valued and change is often viewed as suspect. By addressing these underlying core values, Bible translation teams witnessed the wide adoption of a powerful tool for evangelism and discipleship, vernacular language Bible translations. They certainly addressed accessibility issues like orality, literacy, and distribution as well. While strong local ownership was not a determining factor in every successful program assessed in this systematic review, it was a decisive negative factor in every unsuccessful Bible translation program. The data also indicated that additional contextual factors influenced VLBT use besides diglossic issues

The answer to RQ #3 showed that several of the projects reported vernacular Bible use in multiple domains of church. Two projects, Dagomba and Konkomba, reported very high levels of use in other domains but not in PCBR.

Summary of Systematic Review Findings

- Scripture Engagement workshops proved to be definitive in multilingual contexts.
- Patterns of diglossia do influence use, but they are not deterministic. Translation teams that empowered church leaders to consider their own multilingualism frequently saw them adopt the use of VLBTs.

- There are other contextual factors besides sociolinguistics that need to be considered like cultural preferences, religious patterns, theological views of language, theological views of the Bible, and ecclesiology. These are not internal to the work of the Bible translation program but contextual factors that influence people's worship choices. When translation teams empowered church leaders to consider these topics, use of those Bible translations increased. This also challenges the single factor hypothesis, that a single issue, like diglossia, or access, or local ownership can explain or address most or all of the issues influencing Scripture Engagement.
- Local ownership is a critical but often misunderstood issue. Several studies identified the centrality of local ownership, but definitions of local ownership need to be expanded to include discussions of multilingualism and the significant theological change introduced through vernacular Bible translation.

Revisiting the Sulawesi Data

It is appropriate to discuss how the Sulawesi Research and this systematic review relate to one another. First, the Sulawesi Research unintentionally makes the case for Scripture Engagement advocacy by demonstrating that VLBTs are not always used in contexts where Bible translations are needed for understanding. This is important because it contradicts the reductionistic assumption that all that is needed for successful translation is access.

Second, the suggestion by the Sulawesi Research that where the language of wider communication becomes dominant in church, VLBT can never be adopted seems to find support in the data they collected. However, this systematic review contradicts that conclusion by finding numerous cases across multiple regions where VLBTs were successful in such contexts. Churches began using vernacular language Bible translations after the application of carefully selected Scripture Engagement activities.

Third, this systematic review reveals the fundamental flaw of the Sulawesi Research design. They conclude that factors related to diglossia best explain and most significantly influence the eventual use or non-use of VLBTs, but their hypothesis ignores the complexity of social settings in Sulawesi and elsewhere. The tendency to overly rely on a single interpretive lens or causal factor is often referred to as a monocausal explanation. A monocausal explanation is a kind of reasoning or analysis that attributes an outcome to a single cause. This approach oversimplifies complex systems or events by identifying one primary factor as responsible, often ignoring or minimizing other contributing variables. The Sulawesi Research reduces the primary cause of use or non-use to a limited set of factors using a single theoretical lens.

There are numerous other factors significantly influencing the use of Scripture in Sulawesi. Scripture Engagement research beyond diglossia (Whisler 2020) conducted in one of the languages included in the Sulawesi Research—Manado Malay— identified a number of factors influencing use of Scripture including the following: theological views of the Bible (bibliology), theological views of language (theolinguistics), theological views of the way church should be conducted (ecclesiology), and theological questions about the ways the Bible should influence daily life (practical theology/missiology). It also identified oral preference learning and a lack of facilitation of audio listening groups. It further recommended greater efforts at local ownership and intentional partnerships with all denominations. The Sulawesi Research itself identifies lack of reading fluency as an inhibiting factor. All of these issues beyond diglossia are addressable. Lack of use is not a permanent state. It has been successfully addressed elsewhere.

ROTATING PASTORAL LEADERSHIP

The official policy of the dominant denomination appears supportive of vernacular languages, but everything that is done practically suggests a strong preference for Bahasa Indonesia. Pastors in the Protestant Churches of Indonesia are almost never from the community in which they serve and are rotated every few years. The result is that the pastors rarely if ever know the local language, and few ever bother to learn it given that they will be rotated to another post soon enough (generally, in three to five years). Pastors' lack of fluency in the local language is a significant impediment to the use of VLBTs in church domains.

AVERSION TO CHANGE / COMMITMENT TO TRADITION

Members of Western cultures value novelty and change while many majority world societies value continuity of tradition.

Anthropologist Everett Rogers in *Diffusion of Innovations* (2003) details the challenges of introducing change. Changes in technology are the easiest changes for societies to adopt; changes in behavior are more difficult; and changes in values are the most difficult changes of all. The adoption of a new Bible translation consists of all three of these kinds of change. It includes a change in the way people view Scripture, which is a change in theology (Burke 2003). It involves a change in the way church is approached, a change in ecclesiology. These are not easy changes for any culture, and they are more difficult in societies that value tradition.

UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE

Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance strive to minimize uncertainty and ambiguity through strict rules, regulations, and structures. They prefer predictability and stability and may be less open to change or new ideas. Such societies tend to exhibit high levels of anxiety and seek to reduce

it (Hofstede and Hofstede 2010). Before 1975, schoolteachers could use vernacular languages in the first three grades to help children learn the basics before switching to Indonesian. But then in 1975, Indonesian President Suharto outlawed the use of vernacular languages in education. As a result, many kids were abused by teachers for using their own languages on school property. It was after Suharto fell in 1997 that freedom of the press returned and the government no longer had sole ownership of television and radio networks. Regional autonomy and other reforms in the next few years allowed for the development of local languages, and “inferior” languages were allowed to be used publicly and printed in newspapers and on public banners, etc. Most denominational leaders attended school during these years of forbidding the use of local languages in official settings, and these experiences will influence their thinking. Indonesians also have a recent history with interethnic tensions. These challenges make it less likely for people to quickly see the benefit of making changes to public worship patterns.

EMPHASIS ON RITUAL OVER UNDERSTANDING

The Sulawesi Research suggests that people could understand Indonesian adequately for Christian discipleship. This was not proven by their data which relied on self-reporting rather than research methodologies actually designed to measure levels of understanding. Whisler’s multidisciplinary research (2020) reported that lack of understanding was a significant issue in Manado Malay, one of the languages assessed in the Sulawesi Research. A lack of emphasis on understanding in Christian discipleship is a cultural issue in Indonesia. The traditional religious systems of Indonesia’s pre-Christian, animistic past did not emphasize understanding. Similarly, in other religious traditions within the region – Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam – understanding is not in focus (Hatcher 2022). These patterns of thinking about sacred texts in neighboring religious contexts influence Christians in Sulawesi too. However, the Bible emphasizes centrality of meaning over ritual, which runs directly counter to the cultural expectations of Christians in Sulawesi and many other parts of the world. Bible translation is predicated on the importance of understanding in Christian discipleship.

Taken together, these various factors illustrate additional contributing factors influencing the use of VLBTs in Sulawesi and demonstrate the inherent complexity of engagement with Scripture. Scripture Engagement is highly interdisciplinary. The Sulawesi Research does make important contributions to this discussion, particularly the issue of “scenarios of resistance.” I intend to use this concept in our Scripture Engagement training and courses. However, the Sulawesi Research fails by seeking to reduce the issues at play in complex social settings, ignoring cultural, theological, modality, and ownership/partnership issues. Recognizing and addressing the multifaceted cultural and social challenges present in any Bible translation program leads to significantly increased use as the cases in the systematic review demonstrate.

Recommendations for Scripture Engagement in Sulawesi

TRAINING OF CHURCH ELDERS

Protestant churches in Indonesia rotate pastors regularly. Church elders stay and typically lead small group Bible studies throughout the week. Scripture Engagement training should focus on these leaders to ensure that they value the understanding of Scripture, its usefulness for life, different Bible study approaches, and how to address culturally relevant topics. Teaching elders reading fluency in VLBT might be the easiest way to increase usage during creative services where pastors often do not know the vernacular language.

INTEGRATE SE INTO CHURCH STRUCTURES

Bible translation teams should demonstrate how local language Scripture can be used in liturgy, choir songs, church skits, annual thematic verses for the denomination and other church posters, and presentation slides with Bible verses in both the LWC and VLBT translations. These are ways of connecting Scripture with the existing life of the local church. Audio listening groups could possibly be integrated into the existing weekly Bible studies. A team of Manado Malay oral translators once carried out a listening session within youth meetings and reported the following: “The young people were very enthusiastic when they heard the stories in their language. They said that hearing the stories in Manado Malay was very easy to understand and they felt very close to them, especially since the service was packaged entirely in the Manado Malay language from start to finish. They were also very happy to be able to share in both small and large groups. They felt this was a blessing, and they hoped we could return to hold another service like this in the Manado Malay language” (Whisler 2025). Notice their emphasis on understanding and affective connection to their vernacular language Bible. This is an excellent example of leveraging existing church structures for Scripture Engagement, and it incidentally calls into question the findings of the Sulawesi Research with reference to this specific language.

HUMAN FLOURISHING

Indonesians in Sulawesi are concerned about many issues including marriage, children, managing conflict, danger from evil spirits, and life after death. Scripture Engagement research has revealed that “people respond to the Gospel in proportion to their conviction that God and His Word are relevant to the concerns of daily life” (T. W. Dye 1985, 39). The understandable Word of God provides an opportunity for individuals and communities to deal with these issues at a deep level, leading to greater flourishing. Pat Miersma was planning a Trauma Healing workshop in Indonesia several years ago. She inquired about translating the materials into the local vernacular language, and her Indonesian hosts said that would not be necessary because everyone understood Bahasa Indonesian well enough. Pat agreed to their decision. At the conclusion of the first day of the Trauma Healing workshop, the local

leaders approached Pat and asked if they could translate the materials into the local language. They explained that they had not understood previously that this workshop would deal with such deep issues and for it to be effective, it needed to be presented in the local language. Understanding Scripture is a key component of human flourishing.

THE COMPELLING NEED FOR TRANSITIONAL SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Anonby, Eberhard, and Simanjuntak incorrectly claim that Scripture Engagement looks only at the internal actions of translation team personnel and that the Sulawesi Research examines the wider social context. Their error, ironically, is found in the fact that their research ignores the wider social and cultural context beyond mere language ecology; it neglects the social, cultural, theological, ownership/partnership, and modality preferences present in each context. Scripture Engagement as an academic discipline has always been highly interdisciplinary because Bible translation ministry is a nuanced, multidimensional undertaking in any context. Scripture Engagement as an academic discipline welcomes the contributions of the Sulawesi Research without accepting the incorrect conclusions they reach. I recommend that the Sulawesi Research team significantly revises their research model to take into consideration the interdisciplinary nature of Scripture use. Bible agencies should empower local communities to recognize these complexities and resource them to address them.

Conclusions

This study systematically reviews a significant number of high-quality Scripture Engagement studies. Collectively, these studies tell the story of individuals and churches using the Bible in a variety of ways. The contrast between the findings of the Sulawesi Study and this systematic review are notable. Both studies examined diglossic societies. Their research found only a few cases of VLBT use. The systematic review found a significant number of cases of high levels of use. This indicates that there are other factors influencing VLBT use beyond diglossic issues. Such use did not happen automatically. It happened as a result of Bible translation teams intentionally answering the fundamental questions consistently raised about vernacular Bible translations in communities around the world. In these language programs, Bible translation teams did not naively assume that if such questions were ignored they would answer themselves. They also did not assume that one single approach could address all of the issues affecting Scripture Engagement. Instead, they empowered communities to consider these questions and make informed decisions of their own. Vernacular language Scripture Engagement is occurring in previously church contexts previously dominated by languages of wider communication, and this success is coming through the thoughtful application of Scripture Engagement strategies and methods.

Appendix with descriptions of studies reviewed may be found by following this link:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1D8y66Db0PvTXgPTp_3dCEz94mboRg02W/view?usp=sharing

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Appendix and Supplemental Tables

Download: <https://jlc.diu.edu/article/146652-healthy-bible-translation-programs-successful-1-scripture-engagement-in-previously-l2-dominant-churches/attachment/308742.docx>
