

## SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT TESTING TEXTS FOR CHILDREN

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Many Bible translators and other people are involved in preparing Scripture texts for children. I believe that we all need to think very carefully about what we are doing in this field: and we should recognize the need to test our texts with children before they are published.

Children's texts are usually selected by adults. And they are prepared, printed and sold by adults, with no feedback from children. Many adults seem to think that it is easy for them to know how children will understand a text or what they will find easy. But it is not easy. There is no escaping the fact that we need to test the texts we prepare for children with *real* children, both with groups and individuals.

Adults are not always right in the way they understand children. For instance, some adults who prepare texts for children deliberately avoid hard words which they think the children will now know. But I have come to realize that children like words that they have to reach for, provided that they are in a context that absorbs their attention.

Another important thing adults tend to assume is that the smaller the child, the bigger the book and the print must be. I don't know the reason for this. And since the eyesight of children is usually very good, and their arms are short, it seems rather strange, doesn't it?

### **Involving children**

In my experience the best texts for children (and also illustrations and formats) can be prepared when the resources of children are involved, at least at the revision stage. In my own work I now test almost every text (and illustration). It does not matter that it takes a lot of time; it is only through thorough testing that we can be confident that the text is suitable for the intended audience.

In this, testing meets a pressing practical need—the need we have to know *how well* the particular text (or illustration) communicates to the intended audience. The outcome of the testing will be relevant to many decisions about the final publication. Is the text too difficult or too easy? Does it need readers' helps? And so on.

Of course the text for children must pass through the usual review for meaning, because it must be a faithful rendering of the Biblical text. If it is impossible to prepare a text for children without sacrificing accuracy, then, of course, that text should be dropped. However, once we have prepared a text which meets the standards of accuracy, we still need to know *how well* the text communicates to the children it is intended for, having regard to age groups and backgrounds. Many questions will need to be answered, such as:

1. How well do the children pull together the threads of the story, the participants and events and how they relate to each other?

2. How much interest do the children show in the story, and how much desire to read it?
3. How well do children understand the context (for instance the country, life and customs) out of which the language has grown?
4. How well do the children understand the words that are used?
5. How well does the intention of the Biblical text come across to the children?

Many adults tend to think that once a text has been “watered down” to the child’s level, that it will suit the needs of children. Not so! It is so important that the text communicates to the children the power, beauty, mystery and wonder of the Bible. We need to discover the widest possible view of testing the Scriptures we produce for children.

### Methods

Now I am no expert in the matter of finding the best way to get from children the information that we require. In fact, it is my belief that the ability to construct good tests does not develop overnight. It takes experience, careful preparation and constant evaluation and revision. Then eventually we can construct texts that really do measure what we want them to measure. Nevertheless I will share a few of the methods that I have used for testing with children. It has been largely a matter of trial and error!

### Factual questions

Before I do a final draft, I try to read the text to a group of children. I get immediate reactions from the text that has been read. The children’s comments about the participants and events in the passage count a lot. If they repeat parts of the narrative, particularly dialogue, I consider that good. Frequently I prepare a set of factual questions for school children. These questions have value, especially when given and answered orally, because they show how well the children have retained facts about the participants and events and the way they relate to each other. Once a child has been won over, you will find him asking questions on his own.

The advantage of this method is that it uses a brief response, and many children can be tested *individually* within a relatively short period of time. If the questions are well constructed the responses will provide information which can be scored quickly, and information can be inferred from the results in a systematic way. But of course factual questions can produce only a limited kind of response.

For instance, in rendering the text of Luke 19.1-9 for children, the title for Zacchaeus “chief tax collector” seemed to cause problems for some older children. Why did the people complain? Wasn’t Zacchaeus a man to be respected? A chief? A later rendering of the text omitted the title, but some children were still confused. Was it his unusual smallness that made the people complain against him? The factual questions helped me to identify some of the real difficulties that a Kenyan child of today has in understanding the Luke 19.1-9 text, and to structure it so that it is clear to the readers.

**Read and tell**

One of the best ways to test text, in my experience, is to have the children hear the passage on a cassette tape (or from a local teacher), then retell in their own words. Misunderstandings will come to light; and if retellings can be recorded and studied, the children's renderings of the text will probably reveal much about their own oral language. Their natural way of beginning a story or ending it will come across.

In some cases, the gestures or sounds that the children make when putting the passage in their own words can be significant to assessing their interest. When such rapport is established that the child "acts out" the motions of Zacchaeus climbing the tree, it is significant for the observer. How does the child project Zacchaeus? Fearfully? Or boastfully? Children will tend to use common idioms in their retelling of the text so that less common ones can be replaced. This is very useful, especially when preparing texts for different languages or dialects.

The read and tell method does have some disadvantages, however. Administering the test is in itself difficult, because the children must be isolated from each other when they hear the story and retell it orally. This requires a great deal of time and supervision. Also the one administering the test must be a person who speaks the children's language or dialect well, preferably a mother-tongue speaker. If a cassette player is used, it can take time to get children used to the machine. In rural situations where children may be timid or shy, or where they are not used to tests, the task may be even more difficult. The adult must make every effort to reassure the children and to arouse their interest in the test. Every test presents a great threat to the individual's prestige, so some reassurances must be given at the beginning.

Rich insight has come to me from listening to a seven-year old child make comments about the Psalm 8 text prepared for children:

How do the babies know about God when they are so small? (verse 2)

How do the babies sing, since they have no teeth, and no words? (verse 2)

Who are God's enemies? (verse 2)

Why are we so important to God? (verse 4)

Isn't Jesus great too? (verse 5)

Why do wild animals eat people if the people are supposed to be in charge of them? (verse 7)

It seems to me that the intention of this passage, to extol the creation, is well communicated to the child. The child's questions express deep wonder. This shows that the children's version has deep meaning for a child just as the common language version has for an adult who reads it. In the end, it is difficult to analyze the children's oral responses correctly. Yet, in spite of the drawbacks I still prefer the oral tests to the classic paper-and-pencil tests, such as the Cloze test.

**Cloze Test**

The Cloze "test" requires that the children fill in words which have been deleted from the text. (Usually every 5th, 7th or 10th word is deleted depending on the ages of the group being tested.) This test measures the degree of

redundancy of the text; readers should be able to provide correct answers or answers which mean the same for about 80 per cent of the blanks in a well-prepared text. Although experts differ in their opinion of the usefulness of the Cloze "test", even for testing English texts, it does have the practical use of helping me see how a text varies in difficulty from group to group. Aside from the fact that it is desirable to have some blanks which most of the children will fill correctly, most blanks should serve to show the difference between the children for whom the text has achieved the desired degree of redundancy and those for whom it has not. I consider the feedback from this test to be good, especially when it goes along with information from teachers about comprehension, application to certain age groups and other things.

### Conclusion

In the end what I want to say is this: before finalising any text, it is so important to actually test it out with many groups of children. Only testing will insure that the text is suitable for the intended audience. My concern is that we make the best possible texts available to children, because in general, children are the most demanding, curious, observant, quick, honest and sensitive readers on earth.

## NOTES

### Of birds and beasts: Zephaniah 2.14

In Zephaniah 2.4-15, the prophet delivers oracles against various nations, namely the Philistines (2.4-7), the Moabites and Ammonites (2.8-11), the Ethiopians or Sudanese (2.12), and the Assyrians (2.13-15). These nations represent the enemies of Judah in the west, east, south and north respectively, and also enemies near and far, small and great. The climax of the list is the Assyrians, who were the major power oppressing the people of Judah in Zephaniah's own day, the late seventh century B.C.

The prophet asserts that the might of the Assyrian empire will be ended, and its capital city Nineveh destroyed (2.13). He goes on in 2.14 to give a description of the deserted city, and the wild creatures that live among its ruins. This verse contains several problems of text, vocabulary and translation on which the following notes may offer some help.

RSV begins the verse "Herds shall lie down in the midst of her". In English, the word "herds" refers primarily to groups of large cattle like cows and oxen, whereas the Hebrew word which it translates (*adārim*) includes also smaller animals such as sheep and goats. The normal English term for groups of such animals is "flocks". In ancient times, these small animals were more common and more numerous than large cattle, so some modern English versions such as JB and NEB translate as "flocks" rather than "herds". In order to show that both large and small cattle are included, GNB and NIV mention both "flocks" and "herds". Translators need to be sensitive to the exact range of meaning of words, even in cases like this where nothing of theological importance is involved.