

THE CASE OF ASIA GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

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Challenges Facing Asia Graduate School of Theology (AGST)

AGST faces a number of challenges in an attempt to place the Language and Culture Institute, an orality-focused program, in a degree-granting Formal Educational Institution (FEI) and in the context of Theological Education (TE).

Challenge 1: The culture of education and literacy in the Philippines. When the Spaniards first arrived in the Philippines, they were surprised to find out that the Filipinos had a higher literacy rate compared to Madrid (Spain). But that did not stop both Spaniards and Americans to bring to the islands their educational system, which further reinforced the culture of education. Filipinos pride themselves in earning a diploma or a degree toward a profession. Thus, TE, in this regard, is one of those professions that in order to achieve, one must be enrolled in an FEI that is fully compliant with the requirements of the Department of Education.

At the end of the educational program, the person earns a degree and qualifies for certain job or profession. Graduates in TE from any FEI belong to a very small population, which can be described as being made up of ministers, missionaries, or sometimes like square pegs in round holes. The last situation is true with other degree holders. It is important in a culture of education to show proof of having completed a degree. Although TE graduates belong to a small population, the nature and purpose of social participation is extremely significant; just think of assuming the responsibility for spiritual transformation and the perpetuation of Christian life and witness.

Challenge 2: The organizational and denominational mandate of FEI in TE. Educational programs among FEI in TE cater to a certain branding, which makes programs specialized, limited, inflexible, and protective of that branding. Programs are specialized because they cater to the intentions of the organizations and denominations that undergird the FEI in TE.

Where organizations and denominations require an educational pathway for entering the professional ministry workforce, student recruitment for FEI in TE is assured. However, the student population is limited in number and institutions may compete with each other for more students. Keeping programs running, sufficiently funded, and with qualified students enrolled requires great balance. A success rate of an FEI in TE also reinforces inflexibility in making program changes, which in turn is also a protection of the school's branding. Self-evident in every FEI in TE is that branding. Regardless of any FEI in TE and their branding, orality is not in their programming radar. However, there is a way to address this, which leads to the next challenge.

Challenge 3: How to qualify the inclusion of reaching oral cultures in the mission mandate as a rallying point for FEI in TE. While it is widely held that the Church exists for missions and FEI in TE institutionally equips the people of God, there is a specific need to highlight the mechanism in reaching oral cultures. To bring everyone to this level of understanding and agreement is the first line of thought in advocating for the inclusion of orality with FEI in TE. From here, images of unreached people groups can be showcased and the question of how to win them to the gospel naturally qualifies orality as one of the best ways to achieve global evangelization.

Of the many programs being offered, orality could naturally find its place in areas of intercultural studies and other mission programs. If organizations and denominations are committed in some way to missions, advocates of orality will have to define missions to include reaching oral cultures and from there make a commitment to include orality in their programs. A recent article in *The Evangelicals Today* has expressed this sentiment as well as in support of the *Cape Town Commitment*. The history of missions is replete with models of winning unreached people groups. The time has come for FEI in TE to seriously acknowledge orality as a frontier strategy in missions, affirming oral cultures and hastening cultural revitalization and spiritual transformation.

Challenge 4: Reframing an orality focused program in the context of a global interest in the preservation of languages and cultures, which is being showcased by the United Nations and more recently by Google's the Endangered Languages Project. It is not easy for FEI in TE to immediately jump into this scene. They would have to deal with institutional legacy issues with their stakeholders and test their markets. If all went well, FEI in TE would enter this open door where graduates could win unreached people groups of the world. As a result, there would be the creation of a new career path, a new profession, and the development of a new resource pool of expert practitioners in language and culture. This would become a mission platform that would have acceptability even in restricted access countries.

Challenge 5: The value of the GloCal (global and local) recognition of the institution: the program and the graduates that will provide recognition, acceptability, and employability. While legal compliance may not be a problem at the local level, the standards could be challenging at the global level. To avoid the stigmatization of seminary graduates entering the secular world, some FEI in TE have traded the name of their schools to more neutral-sounding names. The intentions are quite self-evident. However, it still lacks a global branding that provides recognition, acceptability, and employability. There are international accreditation and recognition organizations that could provide the Language and Culture Institute (LCI) and its graduates the recognition, acceptability, and employability among oral cultures in the unreached people groups of the world.

Assessment of Oral Preference Learners

The assessment of oral preference learners takes place on three facets: the program, the practicum, and the final product. This assessment is informed by the objectives of the LCI, namely: (1) evangelization of Bibleless UPG, (2) diffusion of translated oral Bible story sets, (3) development of local leaders, (4) commencement of written Bible translations, and (5) spawning of church-planting movements for the spiritual transformation and cultural revitalization of ethnolinguistic communities.

The LCI program goes through a four-day systems approach workshop on curriculum planning, design, and development in which experts and practitioners in the multi-faceted work of missions

among unreached people groups participate. This process includes a paradigmatic image of a target society, the ideal graduate, and the educational process that connects the graduate to the society in meaningful and fruitful engagement.

With a clear image of an oral culture and the ideal graduate for such a society, the question to work on concerns the training design. This last part deals with the description of content to be taught, the learning environment, the assessment of taught content, faculty line up, duration of the program, and practicum.

The uniqueness of the LCI training design is the village-life setting of the learning environment. It offers an extended simulation of life among the unreached people groups by living in huts, without modern comforts of electricity, water, and kitchen. Learning does not take place in the sterile environs of the classroom, where application of knowledge is reserved for the future. The faculty line up is comprised of expert practitioners in the field of language and culture learning, anthropology, missiology, theology, medicine, survival skills, community development and organizing, church planting, linguistics, Bible translation, ethnoarts, popular vernacular media and documentation, spiritual warfare, evangelism and discipleship, and storying.

The LCI assessment of oral preference learners also takes place at the practicum level. Student missionaries are assigned to an ethnolinguistic community for the duration of the program. They serve this language community every weekend and apply their learning in language and culture acquisition. The rest of the content is taught in the LCI program.

Within six months, the student missionary will be able to speak the language, learn the culture of the assigned language community, and be able to fully apply orality in evangelism, discipleship, church planting, and oral Bible translation of story sets. A positive assessment of oral preference learners takes place when the assigned language community actually achieves the work that the student missionary was sent out to serve. There will be indications of sustainability and generativity by way of local ownership, local leadership, community engagement, church-planting movements, and the instilling of a Revelation 7:9-10 mindset and conviction among the oral preference learners.

The end product is the LCI final assessment of oral preference learners. We deal with the training design that achieved the institutional objectives. We have faculty that critically observes the objectives and assessments of taught content in the lives and ministry of the student missionaries. We produce an ideal graduate who successfully completes the LCI program and performs his or her practicum well. We have a language community that begins to appreciate their language and culture as oral strategies are applied in documenting, preserving, and perpetuating their language and culture. We see oral Bible story sets being translated and used by the language community in the work of evangelism, discipleship, and church planting. We see the diffusion of the multi-faceted elements of orality pervade the language community. We see spiritual transformation taking place in the language community under local leadership that was spiritually nurtured by the student missionary. We see the beginning of a written Bible translation taking place.

Future Plans of the LCI

The LCI has a front end and a back end. On the front end, the work of language and culture documentation and preservation is the secular face of the LCI, employing anthropology, community development and organizing, and linguistics. On the back end, the LCI is propelled primarily by the work of Bible translation and the spiritual transformation of unreached people

groups, using orality as the major strategy of accomplishing institutional objectives. With these in mind, what is the vision of the LCI into the future?

Driven by missions, the LCI will formulate partnership standards, engagement standards, network coordination, and cloud data management. LCI graduates will be deployed as language and culture workers among would-be partners overseas, thus the necessity of partnership standards that will govern the bilateral relationship. In addition to this, the LCI will also define the engagement standards with different publics in mind. Engagement could take place among religious and secular, government and non-government organizations, and people's organizations. It will spell out the parameters of engagement in line with these audiences. Eventually, a web of connections will emerge, and coordination of the network will be a necessity. All these intersections will produce information, hence the necessity to setup cloud data management at the onset.

We see the reframing of the LCI to comply with global platforms. While we comply with local requirements for recognition and accreditation and seek collegial association with FEI in TE, we will also pursue global recognition and accreditation so that LCI graduates can be deployable, acceptable, and employable among ethnolinguistic communities where their language and culture are being endangered. In order to achieve this, the LCI program will follow the values of flexibility of the design, adaptability in diverse contexts, and sustainability in administration and finance.

The LCI program will adhere to its core themes and make adjustments on the basis of global recognition requirements (front end) and ethnolinguistic sensitivity (back end). On the basis of its vision, goals, and objectives, the LCI will invite potential partners who will cooperate, contribute, and collaborate in the various areas of the work, such as administration, finance, education, and deployment to name a few. The LCI will facilitate the emergence of servant consultants that are GloCally recognized and sought after. A community of practice will also be institutionalized in which best practices, career pathways, service opportunities, continuing education, and professional care are also addressed.

Questions and Challenges

- 1) How has the FEI in TE in your own country responded to orality in TE?
- 2) How do you address the challenges of FEI with orality in TE?
- 3) What do you think of establishing a region-wide community of practice in orality?
- 4) How would you like orality in TE to look and be recognized in the region?
- 5) What do you think we need to do to see orality in TE contributing greatly to a vision of Revelation 7:9-10?