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Voice Technologies Not Yet Ready to Push Literacy

[Aida Akl](#)

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FILE – An Afghan letter writer (R) writes for his customer in Kabul, May 17, 2010. (Reuters)

Voice-enabled devices have the potential to unlock a world of information for illiterate populations around the world. But certain needs have to be met before voice recognition can significantly impact literacy, says a leading education technology expert.

“There is so much going on where you need to be literate,” said Michael Trucano, the World Bank’s senior education and technology policy specialist.

One issue is that the world, particularly in developing regions, is full of printed content – documents that need to be written or signed, and vital information about health and well-being that needs to be read. For [780 million non-literate people](#) in the world, the inability to do any of these things is a huge impediment.

But voice recognition technologies can be a potential bridge to promote literacy, Trucano said. One example is the subtitling of karaoke or movies in India.

Small pieces, big picture



Members of the PlanetRead community view songs with Same Language Subtitling at the Gulbai Tekra Slum in Ahmedabad, India. (Jaydeep Bhatt)

Working with local partners, PlanetRead uses eye-tracking and karaoke-style subtitles to push literacy through a sound-to-text system. As people watch television, they see the lyrics of music videos and film songs displayed on the screen in the same language as the audio.

Called “Same Language Subtitling,” the approach strengthens correspondence among weak and struggling readers by “integrating perfectly matching text into their film song viewing,” the organization said.

The subtitling “gives automatic and inescapable reading practice to millions of viewers,” said PlanetRead founder [Brij Kothari](#). It’s “karaoke on existing Bollywood content on TV for everyday and lifelong reading practice.”



A woman in Upper West Ghana listens to a message on a Talking Book (©Literacy Bridge, 2015)

A different approach is taking place in Ghana, in regions with few resources and low literacy levels. Using a low-cost audio computer called the Talking Book, the Literacy Bridge, a nonprofit group, disseminates information to users about health, agriculture, and education “in their own dialect,” said the group’s executive director, [Cliff Schmidt](#).

Users also record their own messages and feedback, thereby creating their own digital content in areas where there is none.

While promising, these low-cost interventions yield “marginal and diffuse” literacy gains, said Trucano of the World Bank. They are, however, pieces of a much larger “literacy, low literacy, illiteracy challenge.” Paired with voice recognition, they could spur people to increase their literacy skills.

“These will be important building blocks of many of the illiteracy efforts that we’re going to see,” he said.



Aida Akl

Aida Akl is a journalist working on VOA’s English Webdesk. She has written on a wide range of topics, although her more recent contributions have focused on technology. She has covered both domestic and international events since the mid-1980s as a VOA reporter and international broadcaster.

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