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Introduction

Scripture memory continues to be recognized in western society as a valued practice for children and adults alike (Boykin 2015, Houser 2014, Pope 2013, Smalley 2014). Internalization of Scripture takes this practice a step further by connecting learners with content in such a way that they understand not just the words but also the underlying concepts, including both the semantic and pragmatic functions of the original material. Successful internalization allows these functions to be reconstructed in other contexts, whether in a different form or register or in another language altogether, thereby making the material accessible to other audiences.

Drawing on learning theory, brain science, principles of memorization, and the world of oral Bible translation, this article proposes four components essential to effective internalization: the four Es of *encountering* the passage, *experiencing* the details, *engaging* the whole, and *establishing* consistency in the retelling. The combination of these elements provides a simple but powerful framework that can easily be adapted for learning and sharing God's Word in any context.

After laying out some foundational concepts, including a brief definition and history of internalization, I present the suggested framework, then discuss factors involved in adapting it across contexts. Ultimately, I hope this work will strengthen the hands of those seeking to learn, recall, and share Scripture as part of discipleship training, pastor education, Bible translation, or any other type of Christian formation.

Foundational Concepts

The notion of internalization appears in a variety of contexts, but only in the last few decades has it become connected with learning and reproducing Scripture. The

following subsections provide a basic definition of internalization, explain how it differs from the related discipline of memorization, and give a brief overview of its application to Scripture, beginning with initiatives in oral Bible storying and translation.

Defining Internalization

The words *internalize* and *internalization* date back to the 1850s (etymonline.com). Current dictionary definitions of these words generally reference absorbing or incorporating something into a system, as found in a variety of disciplines: psychology (adopting attitudes or behavior, Oxford Dictionary); economics (absorbing costs, Oxford); biology (bringing materials inside a cell membrane, Oxford); public speaking (mastering a message before delivery, Zumwald and Company 2020); and language learning and acquisition (knowing some aspect of a language well enough that it can “be retained and retrieved when needed for communication,” British Council, n.d.).

In each case, internalizing conveys the idea of getting (and keeping) something inside a person or system. Likewise, the internalization of Scripture refers to getting (and keeping) God’s Word inside of us in such a way that it becomes part of us.

Differentiating Internalization from Memorization

In many ways, internalization resembles memorization and can draw on many of the same techniques. Indeed, memorization remains a useful practice for many settings. Internalization takes memorization one step further, differing in one key aspect—reproducibility in other contexts.

Memorizing focuses on retaining the exact presentation of content, such as the sounds, word forms, and word order. Someone can memorize material by reproducing the sounds and the rhythm without understanding the content. Someone can also memorize material and understand the content deeply in a variety of ways, from relating to it personally to understanding its linguistic features. Internalization focuses specifically on a functional grasp of two dimensions (inspired by Rett Parker, personal correspondence, 2022):

1. Understanding the meaning of the words, including their connotations and associations (semantics).
2. Understanding any other effects intended by the passage, such as what emotions are involved, the intended illocutionary force, or which parts receive more emphasis (pragmatics).

Ultimately, internalization focuses on understanding the material in such a way that the concepts can be expressed both accurately and naturally in a new context. Someone who has internalized material can change the exact words, sentence order, and other factors as needed to communicate to a different audience. For example, someone might change the register of the material, choosing simpler words and sentence constructions for a little child. In cross-cultural situations, people can express internalized material in a completely different language.

A Brief History of Internalization and Oral Bible Translation

Internalization comes to us from the world of oral Bible storying and translation, which began with chronological Bible storytelling by New Tribes Mission in the Philippines in the 1960s (Toler 2020). In 2007, Robin Green proposed that a full oral Bible translation should be possible. As more teams embraced the idea of oral translations and started developing the practice, internalization became a necessity—somehow the mother-tongue translators needed access to the source text, and it would have to happen orally.

Since that time, individuals and teams all over the world have been learning how best to facilitate internalization. With my background in arts and education, I was invited to join the conversation in 2017 by helping train Dallas International University students in internalization as part of their oral Bible translation coursework. More recently, practitioners have started codifying best practices in their experience, such as the documentation produced by Suzuki (2022), Kelly (2020), and Stahl and Stahl (2019).

The field is still young. Many of the current recommendations for internalization overlap while also manifesting the kinds of variations expected from the authors' different experiences. This article proposes four core components that can anchor this body of recommendations, providing a memorable, easily transmittable, readily adaptable framework for internalization across contexts. Drawing on my own experience in the worlds of education and memorization for music performance, I also demonstrate how the framework is founded on well-established theories and scientific research. In providing this information, I hope to equip many within but also beyond the translation world to proceed with confidence in internalizing and reproducing Scripture in their ministry contexts.

The Four Es—A General Framework

Four components, or the four Es, can effectively anchor the internalization of a pericope. The process begins with a strategic first *encounter of the passage* and its

context, situating the content relative to what the learner already knows. After this initial *encounter with the big picture*, the learner *experiences the details*, exploring the pieces that work together to make up the whole. Thus equipped with an understanding of the finer points, learners can return to the big picture, *engaging the whole* by interacting with larger themes and patterns in the material and processing how the content affects them personally. Finally, learners *establish consistency* by retelling the passage multiple times, locking it into long-term memory. These stages, while roughly sequential, may also be revisited iteratively according to the needs of the learners.

The first three of the four Es follow the well-acclaimed *whole-part-whole* model of learning (Swanson and Law 1993), in which learners start with the big picture before exploring the details. Once learners have spent time with the particulars of a passage, they can integrate those details back into the big picture, and, with this deeper understanding of the material, better connect the whole with their personal situations. This integrated understanding becomes a strong foundation for consolidation in long-term memory.

Another well-tested educational principle, *associations*, threads through each stage. “We learn best by associating the new with what we already know” (Klemm 2007, 64, 68). Paul references Sui and Humphrey’s 2015 work: “the act of self-reference—connecting new knowledge to our own identity or experience—functions as a kind of ‘integrative glue,’ imparting a stickiness that the same information lacks when it is encountered as separate and unrelated to the self” (2021, 62). Simply attending to information and connecting it with something else produces astounding effects, as shown by memory experts who use farfetched actions or associations to achieve feats of supermemory (Campayo 2010, 24).

A third principle, *emotional connection*, also undergirds the process of internalization. According to Tyng et al.’s metastudy, emotionally engaging experiences release “the hormones necessary to remember new things” (2017, 8), increasing the ability to pay attention, learn, and remember (2017, 16). As a result, “learning strategies that emphasize emotional factors are more likely to result in long-term knowledge retention” (2017, 16). At all ages, due to the brain’s plasticity, “emotions contribute significantly to brain development and the learning process” (Adams 2021, 135-136). In other words, effective, efficient internalization must tap into the affective domain. As Odendahl says, “If the formation of meaning has its origin in affectively shaped experiences, then all comprehension of meaning must also be emotionally grounded” (2021, 489).

With this general overview established, the following subsections provide more details on the stages of the internalization process. Each section includes both practical considerations and grounding in research from a variety of disciplines.

Encounter the Passage

The first stage guides people in their initial encounters with the passage and its context. The primary goal is to connect what people already know with the material of the passage to be internalized, “activating learners’ prior knowledge” and “forging a connection between their lives and the subject matter” (Gonulal and Loewen 2018, 3). Several educational theories provide insights at this stage. *Scaffolding* provides “specific just-in-time support” to activate learners’ mental schemata appropriate to the material to be learned (Gonulal and Loewen 2018, 3-4). Krashen’s *input hypothesis*, first proposed for language acquisition but since applied to many other fields of learning, suggests learners need “comprehensible input” to move from i , their current competence, to $i + 1$, the next level of understanding (1982, 20-22).

Practically speaking, learners need to make three types of connections. First, they need to be able to situate the passage relative to their own experiences. To this end, Kelly suggests learners relate similar types of stories that they already know (2020, 104). As mentioned earlier, anything that taps into people’s emotions will prime learning, and stories “build the kind of constructive emotional arousal that helps the brain learn” (Adams 2021, 141). Secondly, learners will benefit from connecting the passage with other parts of Scripture they know, situating its content within the larger context. Third, learners need to process the big picture of the passage itself, building familiarity with the characters, setting, sequence of events, and any relevant background information that will help them interpret the story. The five Ws of journalism often prove effective for this purpose: Where/when does the story take place? Who is involved? What happens? Why/how do the events develop?

Naturally, people’s degree of biblical literacy will impact the specifics of how this stage unfolds, with the goal of providing whatever will help people understand and connect with the material. From Odendahl’s perspective, “Teaching text comprehension always means, first and foremost: establishing access to a ‘world comprehension’” (2021, 492). Learners should interact with the whole text several times at this stage, whether by listening or reading. Engaging other senses, such as acting out the story or using visualizations, will also strengthen connections, as will processing initial emotional reactions to the material.

Experience the Details

Building on the strong connections created with the big picture in the first stage, the second stage guides people in exploring the details. During this stage, learners gain intimate knowledge of all the parts of the passage such that they can express these ideas appropriately in new contexts. In order to achieve this level of familiarity, learners must register and attend to each relevant point and form associations long enough to move the concepts into longer-term memory (Klemm 2007, 63).

Since humans think more effectively when they distribute their cognitive load across multiple regions of the brain, relying *only* upon words will hinder this stage of intense mental engagement. Lampinen and Beike suggest engaging “as many modalities as possible” (2015, 281), and Campayo lays out considerations on visual, aural, and kinesthetic types of memory (2010, 11-13). In other words, drawing symbols, making motions, manipulating objects, or engaging in other sensory activities can strengthen the internalization process of making associations with the details of the text.

Even with strong sensory associations, humans have limits to working memory. Campayo suggests breaking material into progressively smaller units (2010, 83-84), a process known as chunking (Stangor and Walinga 2014, 270). Based on Miller’s (1956) widely accepted claim that humans remember information best in chunks of “seven, plus or minus two,” each layer of division should include a maximum of nine units, with the smallest chunks generally featuring between five and seven thought units. These smallest units, ultimately chosen by those leading the internalization process, might loosely be defined as “coherent clauses” (Holly Younghans, personal correspondence, April 10, 2023), phrases that can be associated well with one piece of sensory input.

Within the iterative process of learning these chunks, “each step is linked to the next” (Klemm 2007, 69). In this way, the parts build to the whole until the person has immediate cognitive access to all the pieces needed to render the full text effectively. Frost (2022, first handout) provides a collection of ideas for structuring this stage of internalization, including using emotions and tone of voice as opportunities for learners to connect empathetically with the material. The following subsections delve into two specific internalization techniques: the benefits of movement and the benefits of visualizations and props.

The Benefits of Movement. Of all the different modalities involved in creating meaning, physical movement rises to the top in some of the latest research. Odendahl provides an excellent summary of *embodied cognition* (2021, 487-488), while Paul

provides evidence that even “low-intensity” movements like standing rather than sitting boost overall engagement (2021, 48). These benefits only increase “by looping in the meaning-bearing movements of our limbs,” which activates both *procedural* and *declarative* types of memory (2021, 54). Paul references the Noices’ research, in which this “enactment effect” resulted in students remembering 76% of the material they were learning, compared with only a 37% recall rate for those who did not include movements in their learning (2021, 56). Overall, it seems that “simply forming the *intention* to move in connection with a piece of information seems to tag that information with a mental marker of importance” (2021, 56-57), strong evidence for the power of taking the time to associate each primary thought unit of a text with an intentional movement.

Two types of motions mentioned by Paul seem particularly suited to internalization. *Congruent* motions “enact the meaning of a fact or concept” (2021, 58). *Self-referential* movements encourage embodied imagining, putting oneself in the middle of the action (2021, 61-64). This concept overlaps with Odendahl’s comments on the power of tapping into personal “body-bound experiences” (2021, 487-488). Both congruent and self-referential movements, then, create meaningful connections between the movements and the material being absorbed.

Likewise, using intentionally designed gestures “advances our understanding of abstract or complex concepts, reduces our cognitive load, and improves our memory” (Paul 2021, 80). Gestures particularly enrich collaborative learning and social interactions (Ferreira 2021, 1464). Paul notes that simply seeing others’ gestures enhances communication by catching people’s attention, facilitating comprehension, and promoting memory (2021, 80), but students who make gestures themselves seem to learn more than those who simply observe (2021, 86).

The Benefits of Visualizations and Props. Memory expert Campayo claims “the strongest memories are those based on images, and even stronger if they are composed of moving images, which I call *mental video*” (2010, 11). Holly Younghans (personal correspondence, April 10, 2023) uses the more memorable alliterative phrase “movie in my mind.” Indeed, the brain can process visual cues in just 13 milliseconds: “Our eyes move to take in new information three or four times a second, and our understanding of the visual input seems to keep pace with this information flow” (Potter et al. 2014, 270). In his book *Cool Infographics*, Krum explains that humans primarily use sight to process the world around them and find the information they need to make decisions. Comprehensible, data-rich visualizations feed this natural tendency, resulting in the *picture superiority effect* (2013, 4-20). For example, people might remember only 10% of

a text after three days, while they can retain 65% of a text accompanied by relevant visuals (2013, 22). These considerations suggest the power of incorporating visual elements into the internalization process.

Planned props (Suzuki 2022, 22, 27, 44) or “random objects” found in the learning environment (Frost 2022, first handout; Kelly 2020, 104) combine the benefits of visualizing with the benefits of movement in manipulating the items. Ferreira explains that “learning environments that have different artifacts supporting students to store, process, and recall information, and specific protocols prompting the coupling with external world during learning process can address complexity and non-linearity in content thinking and problem-solving, which increases not just the engagement but also the learning outcomes of students (Haupt, 2015)” (2021, 1465-1466).

Engage the Whole

Once the learners have internalized the details and own the passage as a whole, they will benefit from taking intentional time to interact with the larger themes and patterns in the material and process how this content affects them personally. This stage serves as a logical extension to the theoretical perspectives already mentioned—wrapping up the whole-part-whole sequence and making deeper personal and emotional associations with an integrated, better understanding of the material.

Learners with an analytical bent may enjoy looking for connections throughout the text, for example, examining the function of repeated words or the use of conceptual metaphors. All learners can benefit from activities that help them process the text more deeply, especially prompts that elicit what they found most salient in the text, what they found disturbing or surprising, or how this passage might impact their lives and relationships in the immediate future. For example, Discovery Bible Study (2020) discussions provide a predictable structure guiding people to integrate what they have learned from the passage into their broader understanding of God, humanity, and the people in their immediate context. Steffen and Bjoraker (2020) cast a vision for how character-centric discussions can help people connect the story with their own situations. Likewise, the *Simply the Story Handbook* provides guidance for leading people through identifying spiritual “observations” and “applications” in a passage (Miller 2012, 37-47).

Establish Consistency

Even after the material has been processed thoroughly through an initial encounter, time with the details, and integration back into the big picture, the content will fade if

not reviewed and intentionally moved into long-term memory. Stangor and Walinga explain that whether information is retained or forgotten depends on how it is “attended to and processed” (2014, 366). Likewise, Klemm lays out rehearsal, consolidation, and cueing and recall as essential elements in the memorization process (2007, 63). Research provides additional insights into how to retain the material most effectively.

Karpicke and Roediger highlight the importance of “repeated retrieval” (as opposed to “repeated encoding during additional study”) for effective long-term retention (2008, 968). Biologically, new information gets stored by the “strengthening of the synaptic connections between neurons,” a process called *long-term potentiation* (Stangor and Walinga 2014, 385). Scientists have been able to identify and track the biochemical traces generated by reactivating the material; these traces need to overlap for potentiation to take place (Smolen et al. 2016, 9). In other words, learners must rehearse material within a critical period, otherwise the biochemical trace will decay, failing to strengthen the connection.

For some years, educators have recognized the role of *spaced learning*, that is, presenting new material at intervals, such as in ten-minute segments, rather than all at once (Klemm 2007, 70). In this vein, Kelley and Watson (2013) demonstrate how “distractor activities” between periods of input improve long-term memory formation. Smolen et al. add to this discussion by suggesting that irregular spacing of retrieval works best (2016, 11), but the research has not advanced far enough to determine the exact times ideal for each situation. Maddox and Balota suggest that “the efficiency of retrieval practice is likely to be influenced by the precise lag used, the retention interval, the difficulty of the materials to be learned and the ability of the learner” (2015, 14).

In the meantime, we can move forward confident in the idea of irregularly spaced review sessions. Based on my work with memorization in organ performance and my experience in a variety of educational contexts on three continents, I currently recommend a starting formula of 20-2-24 for the first three rehearsals: *twenty-ish minutes, two-ish hours, and twenty-four hours*. For cultures less attuned to exact timekeeping, these prompts can become *after a short task, after a longer task, and approximately the same time tomorrow*. Most people will need to continue reviewing the material every 24-72 hours for a few weeks before dropping further in frequency. As people get to know their own abilities, they can adjust these times accordingly.

Revisiting a passage at intervals also allows for subconscious processing to take place. In many cases, learners will find themselves expressing concepts more naturally over time, a most desirable outcome because internalization focuses on the *function* of the communication rather than on exact words or word order. Learners will, of course, need to check their renditions against the original input, especially in the beginning. Over time, the retelling will settle into a consistent delivery of the material.

Factors and Adaptations for Different Contexts

My goal has been to provide a memorable framework that can stay constant across different contexts while also leaving room for necessary adaptations. Indeed, the possible variations on internalization settings are as diverse as the number of people and cultures around the world who might wish to learn and recall Scripture. The following subsections provide insights on five topics that can support practitioners in considering possible modifications: working alone or in groups; honoring learning preferences and expectations; preparing for internalization; facilitating narrative versus non-narrative passages; and communicating the framework of the four Es to others.

Individuals and Groups

Individuals can certainly internalize effectively. My husband, proficient in Greek and doing his own exegesis, had the resources and motivation to set up his own encounter, experience, and big-picture engagement to internalize all of 1 Peter. For establishing consistency, he used the built-in spaced repetition feature of Anki flashcards to prompt him. Similarly, I have seen dozens of undergraduate and graduate students internalize effectively for various class assignments.

At the same time, a great deal of evidence suggests distinct advantages to working in groups when possible. Studies have shown that more brain regions get activated, with more connections among those regions, when people engage with each other, allowing people to learn better (Paul 2021, 191-192). Paul adds, “Human thought is exquisitely sensitive to context, and one of the most powerful contexts of all is the presence of other people. As a consequence, when we think socially, we think differently—and often better—than when we think non-socially” (2021, 189). Adams brings out research showing how both emotional and social factors play an essential role in learning (2021, 136), while Ferreira presents evidence that collaborative learning lightens participants’ cognitive load in a number of ways, especially when groups use gestures and other physical motions to communicate (2021, 1463-1464).

Learning Preferences and Expectations

Internalization works best when structured around the learning preferences of the people involved. The Lingenfelters provide a concise introduction to different factors that affect learning, including learning styles and perceived roles of teachers and learners across cultures (2003, 59-86). While Vella (2000, 2002), *Learning that Lasts* (n.d.), and other resources on andragogy provide an excellent starting point for supporting adult learners, Hatcher warns not to assume that these principles transfer across cultures but calls for the study of “ethnomethodology” in each context (2008, 14). Even within a group from the same cultural background, learners may have different pacing needs or ways of processing information. In other words, facilitators should expect internalization to look slightly different in nearly every context.

When designing internalization experiences, facilitators will want to tap into the culture’s expressive resources and avoid introducing approaches outside those resources. For example, drawing symbols will not work for a culture that does not communicate with two-dimensional representations. Working with the Sakalava of Madagascar, Laura Bracy (email to author, February 8, 2023) asked her team how they liked to play as children. When one of them mentioned building sand sculptures, she brought in a pile of sand, which led to an elaborate retelling of Ruth with stones for Moab and Judah and sticks for Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah, complete with leaf hats. In a variation on the technique of random objects, the man internalizing the story moved these stick figures while learning the text.

Especially in the first and third stages of internalization, which might include questions to help learners process the material, facilitators must consider the communication preferences of the team. For example, direct questions may create offense in some contexts, while indirect communication may not be effective in others. During one of my webinars (Frost 2022), a participant told me my questions felt very “literate” to her and would not work in her primarily oral context in Brazil. Rountree identifies some significant factors in communication styles across cultures (93-117), followed by examples of these factors (2001, 93-117, 194-195, 202-203). Facilitators will benefit from humbly dialoguing with participants to establish a comfortable and productive working environment.

Preparation for Internalization

Exegesis of a passage prior to internalization must be given adequate attention, or the rest of the process will suffer. Internalization depends on a thorough understanding of the material; any gaps in the foundational stage of exegesis may affect the quality of the internalization. Some groups may prefer to exegete a passage together, while others may assign the task to one or more people. The goal is to have one or more people “knowledgeable about the Bible so that difficult issues are dealt with immediately before the team begins crafting the story” (Stahl and Stahl 2019, 6).

Intentionally designing the activities for internalization will make the process more enjoyable and effective. The second posted handout of my webinar (Frost 2022) provides an example guide of how to think about the exegesis and other preparation for an internalization session, being sure to consider both the nature of the text and the preferences of the group. The first handout provides an inventory of possible activities.

Narrative and Non-narrative Strategies

The four Es equally support internalizing non-narrative (poetry, exhortations, lists, etc.) or narrative passages; however, the kinds of information that best support learners in the initial encounter phase differ. For example, learners encountering a narrative generally benefit from discussing the characters, their relationships, and their development, while learners encountering non-narrative can better concentrate on key themes, their relationships, and how they unfold through throughout the passage. Frost (2021) provides additional discussion and recommendations on how facilitators can prepare for different kinds of texts.

When it comes to the second stage, experiencing the details, non-narrative passages may require even more careful, methodical connections with sensory input, including plenty of review. While narratives often progress through familiar, mostly chronological patterns of building tension to a climax and resolution, non-narrative passages may require a more intentional focus on the details and on the relationships among those details. For example, understanding how chiasmic or parallel structures work in Hebrew poetry may help learners retain the details more effectively.

Ultimately, the key for both narrative and non-narrative texts lies in understanding the passage deeply and therefore being able to connect with it emotionally. Perhaps this point explains why non-narrative can feel so much harder—we do not always understand these passages as well, which makes it harder to connect with them in the

affective domain. Given what we know about how emotions help learners absorb and remember content, facilitators may wish to give extra attention to helping people understand and connect emotionally with non-narrative texts.

Transmitting the Framework to Others

Although the underlying principles can remain the same across contexts, the mnemonic of the four Es may need adaptation. Teams in some English-speaking contexts may find the four Es too high of a register and wish to use simpler terms. In other languages, a different opening letter (or sound) may work far better than E. Some teams may prefer to develop memorable motions or visuals rather than focus on catchy phrases. Whatever the form of transmission, the goal is to provide others with a memorable way to retain and apply the underlying principles of the framework.

Conclusion

The sheer variety of nuances possible in each learning context suggests the need for a broad yet flexible framework for internalization. The four Es presented in this paper attempt to provide a memorable, well-grounded starting point, a compact way to present the key pillars of learning while still allowing ample room for creativity as needed per situation.

Internalization comes to us from the world of oral Bible translation, but it is applicable much more widely. From pastor and discipleship training to any other type of Bible-based formation, including personal and family devotional lives, this practice can help people understand and then express Scripture naturally. I have watched student after student return, aglow with stories of being able to share Scripture across boundaries, whether with their children or with a full translation team (see Toler 2020).

One story stands out in particular, as it happened before my eyes. One of my students, from Brazil, had internalized Psalm 67 in English for our course assignment. The next day in class, I asked him if he knew the psalm in Portuguese. He said he did not. On a whim, I asked him if he would be willing to try expressing it in his native language. I'll never forget that moment. He looked up at the ceiling, paused a few seconds, and then started talking, continuing without hesitation. As he finished, the look on his face was priceless—the content was solid, as engrained in his heart as if he'd learned it in Portuguese in the first place. Internalization had brought Scripture to life for him in another way, in another language.

The world is full of people who need Scripture to come to life for them in their context, in their language. Internalization according to the four Es provides a simple but powerful framework for learning and sharing God's Word in any setting, whether in one's home culture or across cultural or linguistic boundaries. May God strengthen our hands as we explore these new frontiers in expressing His Word.

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