

Teaching English, showing Jesus

Fresh thinking on how to show God's love through teaching English

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All of us are able to remember a favourite teacher, someone who stood out, someone who left a lasting impression on our lives.

Would it be fair to say that we often learned as much from who that teacher was than what they actually taught? It is both exciting (and daunting) to ponder how our presence in the classroom interlinks with our spirituality and the way we teach.¹ The way in which we live out our belief system, the Jesus way, has the potential to touch our students as much as the content of our lessons.

That is why teaching English is very precious – to kingdom work, ourselves, and the people around us, the reason being that teaching English should be all about relationship. Every time students are asked to turn to one another and practise an aspect of language, there is interaction, dialogue and exchange. The way we treat our colleagues, local staff and family will be noted by onlookers. The measure of love and concern for our students (even disruptive ones) will be remembered by at least some. When the photocopier is in a bad mood, you can be guaranteed our reaction will be recorded in someone's memory. People notice kingdom qualities in the everyday events of our lives and relationships. We embody His love, forgiveness, reconciliation and relationship by doing just that – persevering, loving, giving, forgiving, hoping and praying – even when there is no encouragement or apparent response.

It is incredible that an estimated two billion people are learning English in the world's education systems and as independent adults.² We have been given a (limited?) God-given opportunity to meet this huge need for language skills and improve the quality of life for individuals, families and communities. It could be limited because English has become a 'basic skill' in many of the world's education systems and millions are gaining proficiency in the language. As early as

2010, it is predicted that the number of English learners could begin to decrease with demand for teachers accordingly.³ For now, though, it is enough to know that a third of this world is learning English and there is a harvest that needs diligent and committed teachers for an intense and complex task. Moreover, the demand for English teachers is significantly greater in the least evangelised parts of the world.⁴

It is true that teaching English has allowed legitimate access for my family into a region that has often been hostile towards believers, as well as flexibility and the potential to interact with people from all walks of life – at work and in the community. There is a bewildering mix of children, monks, students, doctors and foreign business people in my class. We see these people around town every day. Being vulnerable has had a profound effect on interdependency. They help us with our electrical problems. We visit their shops and eat in their restaurants. They come round for pot-luck parties. Their children play with our child in the garden. They come to sample English tea. They take a Scripture portion and talk about spirituality. My wife helps them with their homework. Being a teacher in community has profound relationship potential, especially when the role of the non-teaching spouse and children is seen as a precious part of that teaching witness. Why study about English food and not actually try some especially cooked by the teacher's wife?

Teaching English, however, is so much more than a means to an end, so that one can do a so-called greater spiritual task. Limiting Christian witness to direct and explicit forms of evangelism would be a great loss - for teaching is precious in itself. Rather than being 'missionaries in disguise', we should see teaching as part of the evangelistic witness of our whole lives (cf. Rom. 12:1). Moreover, in the midst of difficulties

1 See more on the 'observer's paradox' in Robison, "Truthfulness in English Teaching: Reflections of a Teacher at a Christian University", *CETC Newsletter*, 2006:2 [website]

2 Graddol, "The Future of English Next - Envisioning the future world of English language learning", *British Council Learning: English as a Global Language*, 2004:5 [website]

3 Graddol, *Why Global English may mean the end of English as a Foreign Language*, 2006:103 [e-book]

4 Purgason, "Teaching English to the World: Options and Opportunities", *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 1998:33

and discouragements, it is good to be reminded that the quality of my teaching is a vital way of sharing God's love with my students. In meeting their most immediate and pressing need, that is, helping them out with their English, the diligence with which I offer my expertise is a 'visible and credible' measure of my concern. The way in which we teach also makes one of the 'strongest and clearest' statements of what a Christian is like - and indirectly the One we follow.⁵

Ponder the reflection of this thinker: The work expresses and agrees with our word of testimony; the word explains the witness of our work. Work is not just a means to an end, a necessary activity so that we can love and witness. Work is a part of that witness.⁶

I am convinced that many students think deeply about the reasons behind quality teaching, commitment to the task, a caring attitude, an 'as for the Lord' work ethic (cf. Col. 3:22) and clear moral standards.⁷ All the more so when they realise that many of us are volunteers who have left family and put aside career opportunities back home. This had led quite naturally to some questions and opportunities to share – with discretion.

Relying on His power and wisdom, we can only trust that our efforts in and out of the classroom will do more than improve grammar but also have eternal impact in this difficult country. May the reflections continue. ●

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5 Snow, *English Teaching as Christian Mission: An Applied Theology*, 2001:65,66

6 Roemmele, "Cloak and dagger tentmakers need not apply", *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 1993:165

7 Baurain, "Teaching English feeds a worldwide craving", *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 1992:167