

Reach Out with English

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Can You Have an Effective ESL Ministry Without Using Christian ESL Materials?

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When planning your ESL curriculum, one of the most important decisions you make will be to choose your textbooks and other teaching materials. Especially if you are teaching in a church-based program, your first thought may be to examine a variety of available Christian materials and then select the resources you believe are best suited to your ESL situation. Simple logic tells you that these materials will allow you to teach English and at the same time teach people about Jesus. To choose these materials over secular ESL textbooks seems almost like a no-brainer.

It may be that a particular Christian ESL textbook or curriculum is the best choice for your teaching-learning situation. These materials may give your learners just the right mix of English instruction along with Christian content that is relevant for their daily lives. Or the Christian materials may be the perfect complement to secular materials that you use for part of your instruction. But are Christian materials always—or nearly always—the best choice for your learners? Does having an ESL *ministry* mean that you must use materials that teach the Bible or at least emphasize Christian themes? Are there other ways you can reach out with the love of Jesus?

Are Christian materials always the right choice for an ESL ministry?

Christian and secular ESL materials often differ in more aspects than simply the topics addressed. In many cases, they also differ in their goals. For the beginning through intermediate levels (the levels usually found in church-based ESL programs), most secular ESL materials have the primary goal of helping learners develop their English-language skills. In addition to this language-learning goal, they may also have a secondary content goal, such as equipping learners to handle activities of daily life (e.g., buying food, going to the doctor), preparing learners for job-related tasks (e.g., reading want ads, filling out job applications), or preparing learners for further education in English.

In contrast, many Christian ESL materials make presenting some aspect of the Christian faith their key emphasis. For example, their primary goal may be to introduce others to the gospel and help them grow in their faith. They make language learning—helping learners advance in their broader English-language proficiency—their secondary goal. Some focus almost entirely on Christian topics with little or no emphasis on teaching English. A smaller number try to do equal justice to addressing Christian themes and teaching the language, while very few make the teaching of English their most prominent feature with the Christian content taking on a more minor role.

Christian ESL materials, often called Bible-based ESL materials, come in many varieties. They include lessons built around Bible stories, lessons to accompany a video or DVD series, collections of conversation topics, songs and jazz chants, and a wide variety of Bible studies that range from studying a single book of the Bible (e.g., Mark) to focusing on a theme (e.g., the life of Jesus). Some Christian ESL materials concentrate on developing only the listening and speaking skills; others emphasize reading comprehension, reading and writing, or all four skills.

Nearly all Christian ESL materials, including those labeled for beginning learners, assume that the learners already speak some English. This means that if your students are true *zero speakers* (they have absolutely no proficiency in the language) or are what we call *false beginners* (they have studied English, perhaps even for several years, but have forgotten much of what they learned), you will not be able to make significant use of many of the available Christian ESL materials until your students have reached a somewhat higher proficiency level. However, as your learners continue to advance in their overall language ability, your choice of Christian ESL materials becomes increasingly broader.

What are the challenges in combining a biblical content focus with the teaching of English?

When ESL instruction is focused on a body of subject matter (e.g., math, citizenship, nursing) it is called *content-based instruction* (CBI). This approach is usually most effective—that is, the students are more likely to learn the content and also advance their English skills—when they already have a basic foundation in the language that includes sufficient skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing to communicate fairly easily with others, even though they may be lacking in accuracy. Common types of CBI instruction are the following:

- classes for immigrants who are preparing to take the United States citizenship test
- classes for those preparing to take exams for certain jobs or professions (e.g., nursing certification)
- classes for elementary through high-school students who are studying in English in American schools
- classes for students preparing to study an academic discipline (e.g., the study of theological English before entering a seminary)

Whenever we combine the learning of ESL with biblical content or Christian topics, this is a variety of content-based instruction. As with other types of CBI, this tends to work best—that is, students are more likely to understand the content and also make progress in learning English—when they are at an intermediate level or above. Having a basic foundation in the language allows them to give their attention to the content being conveyed. If they are at a lower proficiency level, they must stretch to develop their language skills while at the same time attempting to understand the content. When this happens, it can easily produce more frustration than learning and may contribute to their dropping out of the class.

As you consider the focus of your ESL curriculum, keep these facts and their applications in mind:

1. **Fact:** Even when students attend an ESL class for four or five days each week, it often takes them much longer to learn English than most of us think should be necessary. If they study ESL only one or two days each week, nearly always progress will be quite slow.

Application: *It may take far longer than you would like before your learners will be able to grasp biblical truths taught in English. For lower-level learners, this leaves three options: (1) while giving most of your attention to developing language skills, include only the most transparent Christian focus for a more minor role in your lessons, (2) postpone any significant use of Christian content until they have a stronger foundation in the language, and (3) find other ways to present the gospel message, such as via their native language.*

2. **Fact:** Many of the available Bible-based books are designed for those who already speak English. A good

clue to this is when the authors or publishers say that the materials are appropriate for ESL learners and also native English speakers who struggle with reading and writing in English, often called *literacy students*. These materials may do little or nothing to focus specifically on the English language in a way that will be beneficial for those who need to learn English, but they can provide good opportunities for language practice.

Application: *You will need to determine the English proficiency level(s) of your students and the proficiency level requirements of the materials you are considering. Only then will you know if your learners are linguistically ready to comprehend the content focus of a given set of Christian materials. You need to especially be careful not to select materials that are at too high a level for your learners.*

3. **Fact:** It's (much) easier for learners to understand the subject matter when they have previous exposure to the same or similar content.

Application: *Students, including those at the intermediate and advanced levels, who come to us with some knowledge of Bible stories and biblical truths will usually find it easier to comprehend topics covered in Christian ESL materials, while those who have had no exposure to these ideas will find it more difficult. This means that those who are already Christians and those who have a history of attending church will often be able to use Bible-based materials more easily than those for whom the content is new.*

4. **Fact:** Christian content, such as Bible stories, can be made easier through a number of different teaching procedures.

Application: *There are a variety of procedures you can use to make challenging content easier to comprehend, such as pre-teaching new vocabulary, using visuals (pictures, drawings, objects), demonstrating with actions, recycling the same information in different types of activities and for different language skills, and having students first read or listen to the same or similar content in their native language before they encounter the material in English.*

In summary, when including Christian content in your ESL teaching, think carefully about the proficiency levels of your students and their previous exposure to similar subject matter. Then consider what they may be able to comprehend and the most optimal ways of presenting the material. If you plan to focus on Christian content such as a very basic Bible study, make sure that your Bible lessons do not require a knowledge of English that is beyond your students' proficiency level. Instead, pitch the content to a level somewhat lower than their level of competence in English. In this way you will not require them to struggle to grasp the English when you want them to be able to focus on the biblical content.

How do I decide which materials to use?

Let's begin by considering some facts about those who enroll in adult ESL classes. While there is no single typical adult student, many share the following characteristics:¹

- they lead very busy lives with family and work responsibilities, often giving them little free time for learning English
- they are highly motivated as long as they perceive that their learning experiences will benefit them
- they are goal-oriented with specific reasons for studying English and are eager to make progress toward meeting their goals
- they often want to be able to apply immediately what they are learning in class
- they bring a variety of life experiences, and they often learn best when new information is connected to what they already know
- they are likely to stop attending ESL classes if they perceive that their goals are not being met

As you consider these six characteristics of adult ESL students, ask yourself about the kind of class that would be most useful for your students' felt needs. What kind of class will they believe is worth giving their time to attend? How can you help them to maintain a sufficiently high level of motivation? How can you help them to meet their goals? How can you ensure that they are learning things that they can use outside of class? How can you draw upon their life experiences and tailor the class to what they already know? How can you make sure that your class is one they will want to continue to attend?

The answer to each of these questions is to make a learner-centered class a top priority. Parrish (p. 305) defines learner-centered as "instruction that puts the learners' backgrounds, expectations, strengths, wants, and needs at the center of curricular choices and classroom practices." One of the key ways to promote learner-centered instruction is through using textbooks and other teaching materials that are appropriate for your learners' "expectations, strengths, wants, and needs."

Knowing which books and other materials to choose requires doing a *needs analysis*, also called *needs assessment*. This should be one of your first steps in course planning. It will shape nearly every choice you make related to instruction (e.g., your goals, course content, textbooks and other materials, learning procedures).

¹For more extensive lists of characteristics of adult ESL learners, see p. 7 of the *English-as-a-Second-Language Tutor Training Kit* and p. 2 of the *ESL New Teacher Resource Guide*.

How can I be a strong Christian witness in my ESL classroom?

Before starting to read this article, you may have been convinced that you wanted to use only Christian materials for your ESL teaching or that at a minimum you wanted to have a Christian focus in every lesson. But now you're learning that there are some major challenges to using these materials, often making them less effective in conveying a Christian message than you had assumed, and you're also learning that your instruction should be learner-centered, preparing your students to meet the goals that *they* consider important.

So, how can you make meeting your learners' felt needs a top priority and at the same time be a strong Christian witness in your ESL classroom? Depending upon the makeup of your class, you may be able to address these dual goals through effective use of Christian materials, either as a part of your everyday instruction or as an option for learners who want it. But if you aren't able to make considerable use of Christian ESL materials, how will your class be different from a secular class? And if you do make considerable use of Christian ESL materials, in what additional ways should your class be different? These are questions that those of us who are Christian ESL teachers have been wrestling with for a long time as we have tried to define what it means to teach with integrity and to honor the Lord through our teaching. We invite you to wrestle with these same issues as you pray about and plan for your own teaching of ESL.

Being a strong Christian witness involves so much more than using teaching materials that present a clear gospel message. As Americans, we tend to think of witnessing as something that is done with words. However, when ministering cross-culturally, we need to heed the admonition of Duane Elmer (p. 145) who contrasts our Western view of witnessing with what is most effective in much of the rest of the world:

My own witness as a Westerner is quite categorical. I rely on words. Witness is a verbal activity for many of us. Yet perhaps the majority of the world looks at our lives as the primary witness. I wonder, do the people watching us get the distinct sense that we are followers of Christ?

Consider these five basic ways to make your life a strong Christian witness as you interact with your ESL students:

1. **Keep in mind that using secular teaching materials does not mean that you must remain silent about your Christian faith.** Rather, we encourage you to use natural opportunities to share as the Lord leads you. These opportunities often come up outside of class as students ask questions about our culture or tell you about their lives. You may also want to include in your classes a Christian focus on holidays such as Christmas and Easter.

2. **When choosing secular ESL textbooks, look carefully at the values and lifestyles that are portrayed.** If you find content that is offensive, you will need to decide whether to reject that book and select another or to use the book but modify your lessons in order to avoid the offensive material.

If you find that a book you are currently using has inappropriate content, you may be able to omit an exercise or activity, modify it in some way, or make a substitution. These situations may also give you an opportunity to let your students know how your values differ from those being portrayed in the ESL materials.

3. **Focus on the quality of your teaching.** This is far more important than most ESL teachers realize. Based on their many years of experience in adult ESL classrooms, Hilles and Sutton (p. 389) give us a strong warning:

. . . new teachers sometimes . . . mistakenly assume that students are more highly motivated by social than by educational goals. . . . We have found that students attend . . . as long as they perceive they are learning. Students expect teachers to be professional, knowledgeable, and prepared. No matter how entertaining or charming the teacher may be, and no matter how much students may like a teacher, they can always have more fun at home. When the teacher is seen as incompetent or unprepared, and when perceived learning ceases, so does attendance (p. 389).

4. **Build strong relationships that result in mutual trust.** Duane Elmer (p. 98) tells us that “[n]othing significant happens between people unless there is a strong bond of trust.” Relating this to our being effective witnesses, Elmer goes on to explain the importance of relationships built on trust:

If we don’t trust people we probably will not spend much time with them, listen carefully to what they say, follow their advice or put much energy into the relationship. Trust makes all the difference in the quality of a relationship. This is especially true if you are sharing something of great importance, like the possibility of following Jesus. People will take you seriously only if they trust you. If you have built trust, people are more likely to listen to you and consider your message. If you have not taken the time or put in the effort to build trust, it is less likely that they will listen. Most people do not change a lifetime of patterns because someone new comes into their culture and announces that they ought to change their ways (p. 98).

. . . in a relational culture, the job rarely moves along smoothly until a trusting relationship is established. Without trust little effort is made to achieve deadlines, stay within budget or even cooperate. The same holds true for sharing Christ. Without some sincere effort at establishing a relationship first, your words are likely to come across as a “clanging cymbal” (I Corinthians 13:1) (pp. 130-131).

5. **Whenever possible, use your students’ native language when addressing spiritual matters, not English.** The most effective language for reaching the hearts and minds of our students is their language, not ours. Even for more advanced learners, we encourage you to think about ways that the gospel can be presented in their native language. For example, if your students come from a single language background, can you bring into your broader ministry someone who speaks their language? Even if your class represents multiple language groups, can you find Bibles and other Christian materials written in their native languages?

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