Biblical Themes for Christians in Language Teaching

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Opening Task

• Please think of a Bible passage that comes mind and then use the small handout in order to answer:
  1) What does this passage tell you about language, God, and people?
  2) What, if anything, might this passage suggest about language teaching? Teachers? Students?

Introduction

Language – Richards and Schmidt (2010)
Worldview is key, but has many facets.
Norton (2013, p. 16) wrote:
If we agree that diverse identity positions offer learners a range of positions from which to speak, listen, read or write, the challenge for language educators is to explore which identity positions offer the greatest opportunity for social engagement and interaction. Conversely, if there are identity positions that silence students, then teachers need to investigate and address these marginalizing practices.

Assumptions

➢ Language finds its source in God, and as a result is central to an understanding of God, human beings, and God’s creation.
➢ The Bible is the inerrant written Word of God, and is authoritative, clear, necessary, and sufficient for knowing, trusting, and obeying God (Grudem, 2009).
➢ A Christian perspective on language should begin with the Bible and reflect what the whole Bible says about it.
➢ We can learn from relevant writings too.

Methods

➢ My study has been principled, but eclectic.
➢ With these assumptions and an evangelical Christian perspective, I read and reflected on any seemingly relevant Scripture passages, to consider themes and issues that emerged.
➢ While admittedly a limited study, I attempted to consider how seven resulting themes that emerge might guide and impact our ELT work today.

Seven Biblical Themes Related to Language Teaching

➢ Creativity
➢ Understanding
➢ Communication
➢ Community
➢ Sin
➢ Diversity
➢ Redemption
1. Creativity
- Language and creativity appear from Genesis through to Revelation (e.g., Gen. 1, Psalm 148, Rev. 21; Silva, 1990).
- God created people in His image with the ability to understand and use language.
- Language is a creative gift. People can use a finite number of words in seemingly infinite ways (Vande Kopple, 1991).

Possible Implications
- From a Biblical perspective, creativity in, with, and through language is standard.
- Creativity in language (humor, jokes, etc.) reflects God’s grace and creativity.
- Creative language play is the norm in language learning, and appears to be beneficial (Cook, 2000; Crystal, 2001).
- Researchers and practitioners need to keep this theme in mind (McLain, 1996).
- Jesus was a creative Master Teacher!

2. Understanding
- In Genesis 1 God named things, and it is assumed that people understand language (words) and the things, ideas, or concepts that language refers to.
- Adam named the creatures (Gen. 2) and understanding of the concepts and the names (the symbols) is taken for granted.
- Jesus reveals the importance of understanding (Mark 4:13-20); it’s key in life, and Jesus provides it (I John 5:20).

Possible Applications
- Names, signs, and symbols for concepts and ideas may be random (Gen. 2:19), yet they work together in a comprehensive yet comprehensible system (see Field, 2005).
- Language and understanding are crucial and inseparable, yet we can’t explain all connections between them (Silva, 1990).
- The Bible reflects our personal human experiences with difficulties in understanding (Ez. 3:5-6; John 8:43-44).
- Understanding and communication style.
- Paul in Acts 17 in Athens, unknown god.

3. Communication
- Genesis 1-3 show God created human beings to understand language and communicate through it, just as God does.
- McLain (1996) notes the importance of understanding for true communication.
- Ps. 19 notes that communication can reflect God’s glory and can reveal both God’s general and special revelation.
- In the Bible God communicates both orally and in writing, in ordinary human language (Packer, 1981). Jesus does, too.

Possible Implications
- Ordinary, human languages have value. God can and does reveal Himself to people in and through all languages. No language is foreign to God (Ps. 19:3).
- Dialog and interaction are human norms, supporting communicative, dialogic approaches to teaching and learning.
- Language can be used both positively (Gen. 1:28) and negatively (Deut. 11:26).
- There is a need to communicate with people in their own language, supporting bilingualism (Ezra 4:7; Esther 1:22, 8:9).
- Paul uses Greek (Acts 21) & Aramaic (22).
4. Community

- God clearly created people for community (Genesis 1:26-31, 2:15-18, 10:20).
- After Babel there were different linguistic communities (Genesis 11, Acts 2).
- Community usually develops through language (Revelation 3:20, 5:9).

Possible Applications

- Communication and understanding within and between communities (1 Corinthians 14:9-11) is important in ELT.
- Language and culture are key to communication and understanding in ELT.
- There is an important role for the community in English learning/teaching, including through hospitality and strangers (Smith & Carvill, 2000; Smith, 2006, 2009).
- 1 John 3:18 – love with actions and in truth. Paul and Onesimus in Philemon 13!

5. Sin

- The devil uses language to tempt people by twisting God’s word (Genesis 3:1-5).
- There are clear consequences to sin (Genesis 3:8-24).
- The Genesis 11 ‘Babel’ (Hebrew ‘gate of God’, sounds like confused) passage also makes clear that language is also connected to sin (and pride).
- God’s word is living and active; it pierces the soul and judges the heart (Heb. 4:12).

Possible Implications

- Since the Fall, life has meant addressing various aspects of language-related human problems.
- After Genesis 3, language “was affected by the Fall. As sin-affected people, we use sin-affected language” (McLain, 1996).
- Christians involved in ELT should aim to be human ‘gates of God’ who address various types of ‘confusion’ with our knowledge and skills in English, education, Christianity, Scripture, etc.
- ESL teachers talk a lot! Matt. 12:24ff. – “out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.” Is ours full of mercy and grace?

6. Diversity

- In Genesis 10-11 we see ‘clans and languages,’ and God confused ‘language’ to create a diversity of languages.
- The scattering of people from Genesis continued with the exodus, and Nehemiah, Ezra, Esther, and Daniel reveal that God’s people spoke a range of languages.
- Jesus (Mark 5:41) and Paul (Acts 21-22) spoke various languages; Pentecost is another example (Acts 2; Smith, 1996).

Possible Applications

- The Bible reflects human experience of linguistic diversity and suggests that varied languages and linguistic groups will continue to exist in heaven (Rev.; Dan. 7).
- There is a concept of ‘native languages’ in the Bible (John 8:44, Acts 2:6, 8, 11).
- Language and diversity in the Bible incorporates different types of and uses for language (John 16:25) and genres.
- Jesus (Mark 5:41) and Paul (Acts 22:2) used different languages in specific settings – we need to help students in this.
7. Redemption

- After the Fall, God intervened to deal with sin through judgment, and promised He would “crush” the serpent (Gen. 3:15).
- In Genesis 11 we also observe God limiting people’s sin at Babel by confusing their language and scattering them.
- God’s “manifold wisdom” has been made known through Christ Jesus (Eph. 3:10), the Word of God (John 1).
- The role of oral and written language in redemption is prominent (Rom. 10:9-11, Acts 2:21, 2 Tim. 3:15-17, Rev. 14:6).

Possible Implications

- The importance of oral and written language in redemption reinforces the roles of orality and literacy, in faith, in education, and in other spheres.
- ESL/EFL teachers should do their work personally and professionally, on various levels (theory, practice, policy, etc.).
- Clarity and thoughtfulness in language-related work are therefore part of our Christian and social responsibility in applied linguistics and TESOL.

Handout p. 2, #3

- Please take a minute to think about and write down (in the box on p. 2 of the handout) one possible application for one of the Biblical themes for you in ELT – in terms of who you are or what you do. (It can be related to your earlier points on the small handout, as well, if you like.)

Conclusion

- I introduced seven Biblical themes that I believe can be helpful to English language teachers in their work.
- All seven (creativity, understanding, communication, community, sin, diversity, and redemption) themes have possible connections in ELT.
- A study like this reminds me of God’s goodness and faithfulness, and brings to mind the praises of the diverse linguistic group described in Revelation 19:6b-7a:

Hallelujah!
For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!

Questions, Quibs, Queries?
Suggestions or Comments?

The End

This is an on-going work!
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See Lessard-Clouston (2012) for a synopsis of the key points here.