Biblical Themes for Christians in Language Teaching

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In recent years there has been some discussion on the role of faith and religion in English language teaching (ELT) and research, yet little seems to have been written on what the Bible says about such endeavours. This talk aims to help Christians in ELT begin to think about their various activities in light of a number of Bible themes that might speak to who we are and what we do in teaching English, whether at home or abroad. We begin with a short individual reflection task and then pair discussion and debrief, followed by an overview of the speaker’s recent work on biblical themes for Christians in language teaching. This discussion expands upon previous work on biblical themes for language learning (Lessard-Clouston, 2012). Finally, we will consider how the biblical themes introduced might guide and impact us as Christian teachers and volunteers in ELT.

1. Background

• Despite some focus on faith and religion in ELT and research in recent years (e.g., Foye, 2014; Wong & Canagarajah, 2009; Wong, Kristjánsson, & Dörnyei, 2013), there has been perhaps less focus on the Bible as it relates to English language teaching. As a result, the title gives my focus.

• Biblical themes are concepts, ideas, or topics we find as we study the Bible. Sometimes these are reflected in particular words, and they usually help us think about timeless theological truths.

• According to Richards and Schmidt (2010), language is “the system of human communication which consists of the structured arrangement of sounds (or their written representation) into larger units” (p. 311). In ELT our main focus is English, an international lingua franca which can be both a blessing and a curse (Switz & Lessard-Clouston, 2015), and English language skills.

• As Christians working in ELT, the Bible is often central to our thinking, our worldview, and our identities. Writing on identity and language teaching, Norton (2013) states:

  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. (p. 16)

For Christians in ELT, I believe that biblical themes can help us think about our identities in our work, as well as help inform our language teaching and relationships with ESL/EFL students.

• As a faculty member at Biola University, which values the integration of faith and learning, both in my discipline/research and in my teaching, I have spent the last decade thinking about biblical themes that address various aspects of my work in applied linguistics and TESOL.

2. Biblical Themes for Christians in Language Teaching

• In earlier work (Lessard-Clouston, 2012) on second language learning I identified seven biblical themes, which also have clear connections for English language teaching and teachers. These are: creativity, understanding, communication, community, sin, diversity, and redemption. This list is not exhaustive, but sufficient for us to consider in today’s talk. I hope the brief task in reflecting on the Bible and language teaching at the beginning helped encourage you to consider the Bible in new ways, and will enable you to connect it and its teachings to your work in ELT.
• Refer to the outline Table on page 4 for a starter summary of key points on the seven themes.
• If you would like to learn more from relevant literature about related points, key references for each of the biblical themes for language teaching include (but are certainly not limited to):
  • creativity (Carter, 2004; Cook, 2000; Crystal, 2001; Garcia, Garas, & Schweitzer, 2012; Jones, 2016; McLain, 1996; Silva, 1990; Vande Kopple, 1991; Vanden Bosch, 2006)
  • understanding (Field, 2005; Hodges, Steffensen, & Martin, 2012; Kramsch, 2006; Poythress, 2009; Tannen, 2001; Thomson, 2007; Vande Kopple, 1991)
  • communication (Johnson, 2004; McLain, 1996; Muehlhoff & Lewis, 2010; Packer, 1980)
  • community (Pasquale & Bierma, 2011; Smith & Carvill, 2000; Smith, 1996, 2006, 2009)
  • sin (Garcia, Garas, & Schweitzer, 2012; McEntyre, 2009; McLain, 1996; Silva, 1990)
  • diversity (Davies, 2013; Pasquale & Bierma, 2011; Smith, 1996, 2006, 2009)
  • redemption (Ehman, 2015; Hodges, Steffensen, & Martin, 2012; McEntyre, 2009; Pasquale & Bierma, 2011; Piper & Taylor, 2009; Poythress, 2009; Thomson, 2007)

• See other Christian and secular perspectives on language and the themes in the list of resources.

3. Applications of the Biblical Themes (ideas to follow up on)
• Before heading to the next session, please take a few minutes to write a personal application.

4. Conclusion
• The Biblical themes for language teaching introduced here are not exhaustive. This is a work in progress; please email me if you have suggestions/feedback on what I have shared today. Thanks!

5. References/Resources on Language for Christians in ELT

This plenary talk is to appear as a chapter (of the same title) in a forthcoming book edited by Will Bankston and Cheri Pierson: Thinking theologically about language teaching: Christian perspectives on an educational calling.
Table 1 *Biblical Themes for Christians in Language Teaching ‘At A Glance’*

**Michael Lessard-Clouston, Biola University** *(michael.lessard-clouston@biola.edu)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seven Biblical Themes</th>
<th>Relevant Bible Passages</th>
<th>Observations/Reflections/Realities</th>
<th>Potential Applications for Language Teaching (and authors or passages to consider)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>Genesis 1, 2:19ff., Psalm 148:5 Numbers 22:21ff. Daniel 5 Revelation 21</td>
<td>• God used language in creation (days 1-5), even before creating human beings (day 6). • Adam was involved in naming creatures. • God will create a new heaven and a new earth, and has communicated this to us in language, both oral (vs. 3-4) and written.</td>
<td>□ Language is creative, and creativity should be the norm in activities with language, including teaching. □ In language learning and use, creative language play is usual and should be encouraged, if possible (e.g., Carter, Cook, Crystal, Jones, Vande Kopp). □ Be flexible and look for changes in language use.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Genesis 1:5, etc. Genesis 2:19 Genesis 1:28ff. John 8:43-44 1 John 5:20</td>
<td>• Throughout creation God named things (“day”, “night”, “sky”, “land”, “seas”). • It is assumed people understand language, and the things, ideas, and/or concepts to which language/names/symbols refer.</td>
<td>□ Language is a comprehensive system; do our lessons reflect this? Teach connections if possible. □ Language, thought, and culture are interconnected (Kramsch, Silva); reveal this to students. □ Note and teach different communication styles.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Genesis 1:28, 2:15ff., 3:19, etc. Psalm 19:1-4 Psalm 19:7-14 1 Cor. 14:9</td>
<td>• God created human beings to understand language and communicate through it. • Communication reflects the glory of God. • Communication can be used to reveal both God’s general and special revelation.</td>
<td>□ Ordinary languages have value and should be taught. □ Dialog/interaction is a human norm (Johnson). □ Language can be used positively (to bless, Gen. 1:28) or negatively (to curse, Deut. 11:26-28). □ Use stds’ L1 where useful in language teaching.</td>
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<td>Community</td>
<td>Genesis 1:26-31, 2:15-18, etc. Acts 2</td>
<td>• God created human beings to be in community and fellowship with Him. • Holy Spirit enables speech/understanding.</td>
<td>□ Language is key to community/communication. □ Language and culture are interconnected. □ Recognize the role of community (Smith/Carvill).</td>
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<td>Sin</td>
<td>Genesis 3 Matthew 4:1-11 Genesis 11</td>
<td>• The devil uses language to tempt people, and language is tainted by sin/the Fall. • There are consequences to sin.</td>
<td>□ Language is affected by sin, decay (McLain). □ Train people to use language in positive ways. □ Learners/teachers can be human ‘gates of God’.</td>
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<td>Diversity</td>
<td>Genesis 11:1-9 Revelation 7:9 1 Cor. 14:10</td>
<td>• One language led humans to sin, and as a result God created a diversity of languages. • There are many languages, with meaning.</td>
<td>□ We need to teach not only varied languages and groups, but also different ways of speaking, etc. □ Teach different types of genres in language.</td>
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<td>Redemption</td>
<td>Genesis 11:5,8-9 Ephesians 3:10ff. Romans 10:9-11 Revelation 14:6-7</td>
<td>• In His mercy, God intervenes for us. • God’s manifold wisdom involves faith in Christ and thus freedom and confidence. • Speech/Scripture are key for salvation.</td>
<td>□ Orality and literacy are key in learning/teaching. □ Language communicates God’s redemption. □ Learn and teach with humility, imitating Christ’s example (Phil. 2:1-18). Mark 5:19, John 4:39-42.</td>
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