

COMMUNICATION, LANGUAGE LEARNING, AND FAITH
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Most scholars, business persons, and even casual observers agree that changes in technology have placed us into more frequent contact with people of other languages and cultures, and that communicating well with them is both important and challenging. How does our faith in Jesus Christ inform us as educators and learners seeking to communicate across cultures and in non-native languages?

In the broadest sense, the relationship of foreign language learning and faith is about communication--most people studying another language do so because they want to communicate in some way with those who speak another tongue. This essay looks briefly at teaching about communication and faith in a general sense, and then turns to some specifics about communication in another language, across cultures, suggesting motives beyond profit or clear understanding for members of God's kingdom and ideas for teachers of communication arts and of other languages.

Communication involves the speaker/writer, the hearer/reader, and the message. Listening and speaking both imply a certain value placed on the interlocutor. In my view, this relates to the inherent value each human being has, as a person created in God's image. To choose to have real communication is to show "respect for the other as an image bearer of God" (Smith and Carvill 57).¹

The very act of speaking or writing is very powerful. In Genesis, God spoke and the world came into being. Jesus is referred to as the living "Word" at the outset of the Gospel of John. In Spanish, this same verse is the living "Verb", with all the active implications of that term. In some supernatural sense beyond our ability to fully grasp, God's activity in our lives is intricately linked with communication.

Additionally, God does not reserve this power of communication for Himself. He gave the privilege of naming to Adam (Genesis 2:19-20). In this task, "enormous linguistic responsibility and creativity are involved" (DeVries 18). God recognized the tremendous potential of human endeavor when there are no barriers in communication. Genesis 11:6 reads, "The Lord said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them." He then created different languages to force them to obey his command to disperse and fill the earth.

The power and responsibility of communication is further elaborated in James 3. The tongue is compared to a bit in an animal's mouth, a ship's rudder, and a spark capable of starting a forest fire. These comparisons indicate the power of words to guide or to do tremendous damage. James asserts, "If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man" (3:2).

¹There is very little literature on foreign language learning and faith integration. Therefore, I am heavily indebted to David I. Smith and Barbara Carvill's book, *The Gift of the Stranger: Faith, Hospitality, and Foreign Language Learning* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), until recently, the lone book-length publication on the topic.

Speaking or writing, giving the message, is only one half of communication. Receiving the message and decoding it through careful listening and thoughtful reading are equally important. Teaching our students these skills involves moving away from the self-centeredness of believing only our ideas and their expression to be important. Attentive listening and actively engaged reading indicate respect for the other.

Of special interest to me, and the focus of my dissertation studies, are metaphors as a type of communication, or a form of message. In the 1980s, language researchers began touting metaphor as much more than artistic turns of phrase. George Lakoff, Mark Turner and Mark Johnson, through their cognitive linguistics research, found that metaphors are present regularly and in nearly every realm of speech and thought. According to this approach, based on the sheer predominance of metaphors in human speech, metaphor is a central human way of conceptualizing, used “unconsciously and automatically...for understanding life” (Lakoff and Turner 5). Lakoff went as far as to assert that “Metaphor is the main mechanism through which we comprehend abstract concepts and perform abstract reasoning” and that “Much subject matter, from the most mundane to the most abstruse scientific theories, can only be comprehended via metaphor” (Lakoff 41).

In metaphor theory, metaphors are seen as a very frequent and common way of referring to and understanding one thing, known as the “target domain” (often an abstract concept) in terms of another (usually something tangible), called the “source domain.”

As a Christian, I find it almost amusing that it has taken scholars 2000 years to figure out the centrality of metaphor in human communication and cognition. Wouldn't it make sense that the Creator of humankind would use the most effective means of human communication when here on earth communicating with us? Jesus' teachings are full of parables, which are simply extended metaphors. Jesus used source domains such as crops, sheep tending, cooking, all very familiar to his audience, to explain abstract source domains such as the kingdom of heaven. In some instances, he even went so far as to explicitly explain the extensions of the metaphors... “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man...” (Matthew 13:37). Additionally, the Scriptures are full of metaphors, from the symbolism of the Passover to the Prophet's dry bones to the imagery of the Revelation. God, in his written word to us, helps us grasp truth about Him that is far beyond our experience through metaphors based on situations we *do* know.

I turn now to communication specifically in a language other than one's native tongue. In Scripture, we see that God wants his people to communicate across language barriers. The Great Commission mandates inclusion of all nations, and John's vision of heaven indicates that people of all tongues recognize God's sovereignty. The dramatic beginnings of the Church reaffirm God's inclusive call, as people of many tongues heard the gospel in their own language at Pentecost.

Beyond bringing to light these well-known Scripture references to language, how can educators encourage students to reflect on faith and foreign language learning? Setting up situations where students interact in some way with those different from them can be a challenge. In some courses, observation of history and discussion may be the most appropriate learning opportunities. For example, in the Culture and Civilization of Spain course typical to a Spanish

degree, students discuss the Arab conquest of Spain, the Reconquest, and the Crusades, all wars in the name of religion against groups of people who were defined as the “other.”

I require students at all levels of language study to have some type of cultural experience outside the classroom with native Spanish speakers. This includes visit to a Spanish-speaking church service and several hours per semester of service learning in the community among Spanish speakers. In more advanced classes, I invite as many guest speakers as I can find, who serve as representatives not only of their country of origin, but of the immigrant experience. After their visit, we discuss the listening process (dialectic variation, etc.) and the hearing process (what were they able to pick up about the speaker’s worldview). When I have students who are from a Spanish-speaking immigrant background, I try to provide safe avenues (through journaling, for example) in which they can process their experience as minorities in the US, and share this with their Anglo classmates if they desire.

One of the central themes of foreign language teaching for believers revolves around the Scriptural concept of “the foreigner” or “exile.” Throughout the Old Testament, God mandates the people of Israel to show kindness to the foreigners among them, in remembrance of their times as exiles. He also indicates that he has a special tenderness for this group, along with widows and orphans (all being essentially powerless in the societal structure of the time). Smith and Carvill quote Reinhard Feldmeier as believing that “the biblical view of being a stranger always implies an existential covenantal relationship to God” (60).

Foreign language students need to understand this principle. Some of the discomfort of being a foreigner can be simulated in the foreign language classroom. Smith and Carvill comment,

“Rather than making language practice as safe and pleasurable as possible, it is good from time to time not to shield students from situations in which communication breaks down and learners become voiceless and frustrated over not being able to express in the foreign language what they want to say. At such a moment, the teacher must step back and reflect with the class on what just happened, why it happened, and how the students felt” (62).

Again, one way to simulate being a ‘stranger’ is to ask students to visit a non-English-speaking church. This is a first-time experience for many, and my students often comment on being uncomfortable, due not only to the linguistic environment, but also to feeling like a minority.

Help students process and frame short term missions trips and semesters abroad. During this time, they will experience to a deeper degree the powerlessness associated with being a foreigner. In their journals, many have reflected that this time away from everything familiar was a time of tremendous spiritual growth, in which they find that special affection God has for the “exile”. Smith and Carvill observe, “It is important that they [our students] experience the rigors and sufferings of being, so to speak, ‘in Egypt’. However, doing so also carries with it an unexpected spiritual blessing: it provides them with the opportunity to learn in a unique way that they are in God’s special care” (61).

As students themselves experience being an outsider, guide them to reflect on how they can show God's kindness to those who are outsiders living in the US. Some students catch the vision of seeing "the stranger" as individuals created in God's image. A few choose to befriend an international student; others begin seeking out venues of service to immigrants or attending a Spanish-speaking church to start to establish relationships with "strangers."

After teaching Spanish at a Christian institution of higher education for over a decade, I've come to the conclusion that this awareness is the most important contribution I can bring to them, especially those who aren't Spanish majors. Ten years from now, they probably won't remember how to conjugate a preterit verb or be able to describe their family in Spanish, but if they hold compassion and respect for people different from them, I have succeeded. Smith and Carvill propose that "hospitality to the stranger" is "an overarching metaphor and spiritual virtue in foreign language education" (82).

Teaching a foreign language as a Christian is an exciting venture. I am privileged to introduce students to the wonder, intricacy and structure of language. I point them to Scripture about language and communication (and maybe the greatest revelation here is Scripture's pertinence to all areas of life). I direct them into situations where they discover God's design of linguistic and cultural diversity. I am a resource for them when they experience the blessed loneliness of being a "foreigner," if only for one church service. It is my hope and conviction that the broader communication skills and thought patterns that view interlocutors and "strangers" as people worthy of respect, individuals in God's image, will both serve my students and further the kingdom of God.

WORKS CITED

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