

Teaching a Specialized Variety of English as a Foreign Language: English for Biblical and Theological Purposes

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The following, written in retrospect, is from the personal journal of an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher at an overseas Bible institute.

Thirteen students, representing seven different languages, assembled that first day for my class on English for Bible and Theology (EBT). As I greeted these students, I had no idea of the diverse needs that would challenge my skill as an English teacher.

Who were these students and what were they there for? *One man, president of his denomination, wanted help with theological terms and grammar; a woman, superintendent of her denomination's Sunday schools, wanted to be able to understand sermons in English; others, serving as pastors, seminary professors and youth workers in their homelands, wanted help with reading strategies and biblical vocabulary. Although their individual needs differed, I realized one common theme: All wanted assistance in English for a very specific purpose—to access biblical and theological resources not available in their native languages.*

What was my task? *I had eight weeks to prepare these students for biblical and theological studies. The first week was an intensive review of basic English skills, four hours per day. The next seven were given to preparing these students to understand theological and biblical texts, focus on specialized vocabulary, etc. It was clear that their success in their studies depended a great deal on their success in my English classroom.*

What did I bring to the teaching-learning situation? *I had a lot of enthusiasm, an English study Bible, a minimal knowledge of theology, a few outdated journal articles, no textbook or curriculum to follow, a low budget—and a lot to learn.*

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Opportunities and Challenges

Economic or political restrictions in many areas of the world have denied large numbers of Christians access to a biblical education similar to that offered in seminaries, Bible colleges, and Christian colleges in North America. Consider believers in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, for example. Now that political barriers have fallen in these countries, many new converts as well as mature believers are eager to understand the Word of God more thoroughly and learn how to teach it more effectively. But how many biblical and theological articles and books are available in Bulgarian, Albanian, Estonian, or even in Russian? And how many seminaries and Bible schools can offer instruction in these languages?

What is available for believers from other parts of the world, for example, Indonesia, Korea or Japan? Do they have a sufficient variety of theological materials in their languages? And do their seminaries and Bible colleges offer instruction only in the students' native languages, or do they require a knowledge of one or more other languages?

Unfortunately, theological and biblical resources in most of the world's languages are few or nonexistent, thus creating a heavy demand for materials and appropriate instruction in English as a Foreign Language. To meet the growing need, Western missions have sent Christian workers, like the teacher cited above, to teach in Bible colleges and seminaries. Most leave home unprepared for

the challenges they will meet. In one Bible school, for example, 50 students with only a shaky command of English reading and writing skills and little conversational ability expectantly pack themselves into a classroom built for 20. How can an untrained EFL teacher, even though he or she is a native speaker of English, help these students learn to read textbooks written for native-English speakers? And a seminary in a neighboring country expects students, after only one semester of English instruction, to understand theology lectures delivered in English. What can an EFL teacher do to prepare these students for educational challenges such as these?

The goal of this article is to discuss the teaching of EFL to students whose purposes for learning English are (1) to take seminary or Bible school courses and/or (2) to access biblical and theological resources. These learners require more than general-purpose English; they need a specialized variety of English, called English for Bible and Theology (EBT).

EBT Courses

Personal experience has convinced me that we can do a great deal to prepare our students to handle English-language demands such as these. To do this, however, we must design and implement specialized EBT instruction that is based on three fundamental assumptions.

1. Once EFL students have acquired a basic knowledge of English, they no longer share identical English-language needs with intermediate and advanced learners from other disciplines. For example, the language requirements of those preparing to be scientists, businessmen or

pilots necessarily differ from those of seminary and Bible school students. This latter group must read English well enough to understand the English Bible, journal articles, theological texts, Bible dictionaries, concordances, Sunday School materials and other Christian literature. And in institutions where some or all instruction is in English, students also must command the varieties of oral English used in sermons, prayers and academic lectures.

2. The most effective teaching approach for these learners incorporates samples of the actual materials (or simplified versions of these materials) that the learners will use in their disciplines. For example, the use of basic theology books and Bible dictionaries in EFL classroom instruction exposes students to a specialized variety of English and prepares them to handle the English-language aspects of their academic course work. In addition, once they leave the seminary or Bible school, they are better able to make use of a range of EBT resources.
3. EBT instruction must be compatible and integrated with other English-language instruction, so that all such teaching efforts are mutually reinforcing. For example, if Bible institute students must write term papers in English, then EBT course work should contain a focus on this skill as well.

Steps in Designing an EBT Course

EBT courses must be custom-designed for each group of learners. One EBT course may focus heavily on theological terms and grammatical constructions used in the English Bible as well as reading skills required to comprehend course textbooks. Another may include an oral skills component which not only helps students understand lectures given in English but also helps them learn to interact with English-speaking peers and professors—and perhaps even preach, pray or teach in English. Whatever the exact focus, the

following key steps are essential for designing an effective EBT course.

1. Conduct a needs analysis in order to determine (a) how the learners will use English in their theological and biblical studies and (b) the specific language requirements of the seminary or Bible school, if there are any beyond EBT studies. This often involves gathering data from the institution's administration and faculty as well as from the students themselves.
2. Make an accurate assessment of each student's proficiency in oral and written English. This can be done through written tests (e.g., a timed writing sample and tests for general-purpose reading comprehension, vocabulary and grammar) and an oral interview.
3. Identify and classify all biblical and theological resources available to students. These include, but should not be limited to, course texts, journals and library books used at the seminary or Bible school.
4. Determine realistic goals and objectives for the course. The goals, which should be closely related to the needs identified in Step 1, provide a guide for selecting specific content and teaching methods. (E.g, the student will be able to survey a theological textbook by mastering reading strategies such as previewing, scanning and skimming.) Objectives indicate how students will master these goals. (E.g., the student will answer a series of questions which require use of a table of contents, index and glossary of an introductory theological textbook.)
5. Decide on course content and learning activities. Since Steps 1-4 should provide many ideas about possible content, the primary difficulty for most teachers will be choosing the most useful content and most appropriate learning tasks.

An EBT Teacher-Training Course

When there are few teacher-training resources available, how can a Christian worker learn effective

techniques and procedures for teaching EBT? And where can he/she find appropriate materials? To meet this need, the Institute for Cross-Cultural Training (ICCT) at Wheaton College offers a workshop designed specifically for those who plan to teach English for biblical and theological purposes. It deals with fundamental issues of EBT curriculum development including the selection and adaptation of a range of appropriate materials. Participants develop a needs analysis instrument and other resources that they can use in their own EFL teaching situations.

This EBT workshop is part of a 17-day course in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, offered each June. For more information, contact ICCT.

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