

Reach Out with English

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Three Important—and Often Neglected— Keys to an Effective ESL Ministry

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What does it take to have an effective ESL ministry? Most of us have a great deal of experience in working with adults and children in our local churches. We know how to minister to the needs of people who come from our culture and speak our language, but we are much less knowledgeable when it comes to ministering to those who come from cultures very different from ours and those who may speak languages we have never heard of.

Before we begin our Reach Out with English course, we want you to think about cross-cultural ministry and how it differs from ministry within your own culture. To help you do this, we're going to look at three important keys to an effective ESL ministry. As you read about each key, ask yourself questions such as these:

- What do I need to do to learn more about this key?
- What information do I need to discuss with others in my church or organization?
- What changes do I need to make in how I minister cross-culturally?
- What are the steps that I need to take now?

If you are new to cross-cultural ministry, you may be thinking about some of these ideas for the first time. Others of you may have considerable experience in working with those from other cultures, and now your goal is to expand your

knowledge base and apply your insights to the ESL teaching context.

In our first Friday night Reach Out session, we will discuss the importance of these concepts for ESL ministry. As we progress through the three weekends of the course, we will focus in more detail on each of the three keys. Then, for our final Reach Out session, we will ask you to discuss ways you can apply these three keys in your current or future ESL teaching-learning situation.

Key 1: Cultural Understanding

In making your decision to become an ESL teacher, you have probably prayed about your desire to minister to those who have a range of needs that go beyond the learning of the English language. As a Christian, no doubt you want to demonstrate the love of Jesus to a group of people who find American customs and values to be very different from anything they have experienced before. But how can you minister in ways that will make you an effective witness? How can you minister in ways that will result in your students seeing your love for the Lord and your true heart for service?

Patty Lane tells us that culture is “the lens through which all of life is seen and interpreted” (p. 35). When your students come to you for English, they bring with them the only culture and cultural values that they know—their culture and

their cultural values. In everyday terms, this means that they will be evaluating their interactions with you and with other Americans in the only way they know—through the lens of their own cultural norms, values, and experiences.

Most of us have no idea how frequently or in what ways we come across to others in a manner we don't intend. We want to think that if we'll just do our best to be what we think of as kind and loving, we'll do just fine. But specialists in cross-cultural communication tell us that doing things the American way—including what we may think of as kind and loving—often comes across as acting superior, paternalistic, and a host of other negative images. Unfortunately, we have no idea how often we are perceived by those from other cultures not as the Christlike people we aspire to be, but as rude and uncaring—often everything that a Christian does not want to be or to convey. And to make matters worse, our unintentional cultural blunders can do serious damage to our Christian witness. So what can we do about this? How can we reach out cross-culturally in ways that will demonstrate the love and care that we truly want to show? How can we be positive Christian witnesses rather than negative witnesses to our ESL students and the broader community?

The first important key to effective ESL ministry is cultural understanding. If you neglect this key, your ministry will be sure to suffer. So what can you do to promote cultural understanding? Your first task is to become a learner of cultures—your own and others. You need to learn more about how our American culture views everything around us (our beliefs, values, ideals, customs, ways of interacting with others) and you need to learn more about the cultures of your students (their beliefs, values, ideals, customs, ways of interacting with others). Once you begin this important journey, you will find that you are becoming less judgmental of some of your students' behaviors, better able to empathize with their concerns, and more adept at forming meaningful relationships. Your second task will be to incorporate teaching about American culture into your ESL teaching. This will help your students to better understand American ways and adjust to living in our culture.

We will address cultural understanding in one of our Reach Out sessions, and we will also point you to other resources for further study. For now, if this information is new to you or if you simply need a refresher course, we suggest you read *A Beginner's Guide to Crossing Cultures: Making Friends in a Multicultural World* (available from Amazon and elsewhere). Filled with cultural insights and practical suggestions, this book can expand your worldview, launch you into a lifetime of learning how to communicate more successfully to those from other cultures, and help you to be a more effective witness in your in-class teaching of English and your out-of-class relationships with your students.

Key 2: Quality Teaching

When the need for ESL teachers in our communities is so great and there is pressure to begin teaching as soon as possible, it's easy to be tempted to simply jump in and do your best while learning on the job. There are times that approach is necessary, but you need to realize that there may be a steep price to pay for your haste. If the quality of teaching in your ESL program is poor or even mediocre, it will not only affect your students' learning of English but, in addition, you may damage your Christian witness to your students and to others in your community. Therefore, the second important key to effective ESL ministry is quality teaching.

As a Christian, you no doubt want your teaching and your relationships with your students to reflect your faith. But have you considered how the quality of your teaching can affect more than your students' learning of English? Purgason (1998) states very clearly how the quality of your teaching affects your students' view of you as a Christian:

The quality...is crucial. Students who experience excellent teaching, qualified teachers, effective materials, and an enjoyable class are more likely to say "yes" to further invitations. Also students who find that their teacher is knowledgeable and skilled in TESOL matters are more

likely to trust what their teacher has to say about spiritual matters (p. 33).

Snow (2001) expands on this same theme in his book, *Teaching English as Christian Mission*:

Rather than being incidental to witness or even evangelism, the quality of CETs' [Christian English Teachers'] teaching work is the primary vehicle through which they share the love of God with their students, and the strongest and clearest statement they make about what a Christian should be like (p. 65).

...when CETs accept jobs as English teachers, their first agenda must be the effective teaching of English. ...it is often through the responsibility with which they carry out their teaching work that their most effective Christian witness is presented (p. 72).

This leads us to the question: What do you need to do to make sure you are honoring the Lord by the quality of your teaching? While there is no single answer to this question, one important step to successful teaching is getting the professional preparation you need. This is the reason our Reach Out course goes beyond equipping you with a basic foundation for classroom teaching and tutoring to also supplying you with a great many resources for your professional growth after the course is over.

To learn more about ways your ESL teaching can reflect your Christian faith to those from other cultures, we highly recommend Snow's book. Also, see sections 1 and 5 in *Getting Started in Teaching ESL/EFL: Resources for Christian Educators* (CD-ROM to be given out in our first Reach Out weekend) and "Training Volunteer Teachers and Tutors" in your Reach Out class notes.

Key 3: Learner Needs

When planning a Sunday School curriculum, we often begin by focusing on people's spiritual needs and then we think about how we can address those needs through our instruction. Following this familiar model, your natural inclination may be to consider the spiritual needs of your ESL learners

and then look for teaching materials that highlight a range of basic biblical truths or present a clear gospel message.

However, our own experiences as well as those of many other Christian ESL/EFL teachers have taught us that for optimal effectiveness in ESL teaching, we must begin in a very different place. To be most successful, not only as language teachers but also as those who want to be strong Christian witnesses, we must begin our curriculum planning by focusing on the third key to effective ESL ministry, the English-language needs of our learners.

Let's try to look at the focus of our teaching from our students' point of view. Hilles and Sutton help us see more clearly the priorities of our learners:

[A]dult learners are most often voluntary learners. Unlike their younger counterparts, who are required by law or by their parents to be in school until a particular age, adult learners are in school because they want to be, a desire which is almost always inconvenient and often interrupted by family and job responsibilities and commitments. As a result, adult learners tend to have little patience with classes which they perceive are not furthering their own educational agendas (p. 388).

We have found that students attend...as long as they perceive they are learning.... When the teacher is seen as incompetent or unprepared, and when perceived learning ceases, so does attendance (p. 389).

Given the importance of meeting learners' needs, how can we do this most successfully? We suggest that when thinking about the English-language needs of your students, two of the most important questions you can ask are these: Why do these individuals want to study English? How do they plan to use English in their everyday lives? These two questions lead to many others such as, Which of their English-language needs can we reasonably try to meet in our ESL classes? What should our priorities be? Which teaching materials will be most useful? Which learning activities will work best? In short, knowing our learners' English-

language needs should guide us in shaping nearly everything we do related to instruction (e.g., our goals, course content, textbooks and other materials, learning procedures). When you put your focus on meeting their needs, you'll also find that you have gained your students' respect, which will go a long way toward helping you to be a more effective Christian witness.

In our first weekend of the Reach Out course, we'll discuss needs analysis—how to gather information about your students' English-language needs and then how to use that information in designing your course. This theme will be developed more fully in other sessions during the three weekends of our course.

At this point, you may be wondering about how you can address more specifically the spiritual needs of your students, including where this important emphasis should occur in your overall ESL program. For example, you may be looking for ways to focus on Christian themes as part of your ESL ministry. You may want to know how to teach ESL Bible studies or hold conversation classes in which students discuss topics related to the Christian life. You may want to learn more about how other programs have effectively integrated biblical truths into their ESL teaching or broader ministries. You may want to know about when Christian ESL materials are most appropriate for use in your classroom and in individual tutoring. We will talk about each of these concerns during our third Reach Out weekend. In addition, see section 5, "Being an Effective Witness," in *Getting Started in Teaching ESL/EFL: Resources for Christian Educators* (CD-ROM to be given out in our first Reach Out with English weekend).

January 2010

References and Resources

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Reach Out with English is an introductory 30-hour ESL teacher-training course for those who have had little or no professional preparation in this area or who want a refresher course that offers practical instruction for learning how to teach ESL to adults in their church or community. No prior teaching experience or knowledge of linguistics is assumed.