

Defining the Purpose and Mission Behind Core Language Courses

Jennifer Beatson
Gordon College
Wenham, Massachusetts

Rationale

These reflections have been prompted by events in my own professional development, two of which I will share here. First, in summarizing comments from school administrators and senior faculty at my third-year review, our Provost stated that students in a Core language course “ought to wrestle with some of the moral and spiritual implications of their own monolingualism.” He challenged me to think about “ways that a Core language course, as a requirement for a liberal arts degree, can lead students into deeper reflection about the relationship between language, faith and culture.”

Second, amidst discussions of ways to reduce the size of our Core, our language department has felt the acute need to justify our place among the Core graduation requirements for a liberal arts degree. These talks were initiated by colleagues in other disciplines which have a heavier emphasis on professional preparation and experience external pressures and constraints imposed by state-mandated requirements for certification. Given that these outside limitations encroach upon the number of “superfluous” credits students trying to graduate in four years may take outside of their discipline, some feel that a reduction in the Core should be taken from the 8 credits of foreign language. Simultaneously, there are those who, following a recent national trend towards cross-cultural studies and experiential or service learning, would be contented to substitute the 8-credit language requirement with a mere cross-cultural experience offered for variable credit (0-4 hours).

Obviously, as a language professor, I oppose a decrease in the number of hours our students receive in foreign language instruction. Moreover, I found the latter option, which proposes condensed interaction with the culture and only minimal (if any) contact with another language, in direct conflict with the previous petition to challenge my students' own monolingualism. If my charge was to "lead students into deeper reflection about the relationship between language, faith and culture," how could I be contented with a diminished opportunity to do so?

Though sensitive to the perceived need to reduce the core, I believe that, in an age of globalization, with increases both in cultural boundary crossings and in the number of immigrants and second-generation speakers of other languages into the US, the wiser choice is to consider how we can know our "neighbors" better and communicate with them more fully. By keeping foreign language in the Core, we as Christian educators can more thoroughly prepare our students for interactions they will have during and, most importantly, after, their college careers. With the aim of helping to define the purpose behind Core language courses, I offer the following reflections towards a biblical basis for foreign language study. To do so, I wish to draw upon the review of biblical passages commending foreign language study in Barbara Carvill and David I. Smith's book, *The Gift of the Stranger*. Using these as a point of departure, I will add a focus on the junctures at which these passages appear.¹

Smith and Carvill explore various biblical texts supporting "two interrelated themes: the focus on Israel being a blessing to the nations beyond its borders and the call for her to love the strangers on her doorstep."² They champion foreign language study for the increased capacity it affords in terms of extending hospitality at a deeper level of connection. In the language classroom, they advocate teaching students to practice hospitality in two ways: "to be a blessing as strangers in a foreign land, and to be hospitable to strangers in their own homeland."³ One way to extend hospitality to strangers, they assert, is to listen to their stories and to share one's own stories. And it is a gift doubled when the strangers can tell their stories in their own tongue as well as hearing students' stories in that same language.

In its opening chapter *The Gift of the Stranger* grounds its central thesis upon the themes of unity and diversity seen in the progression of the biblical narrative "From Babel to Pentecost."⁴ Smith and Carvill point out that, as He has done since the creation account in Genesis, God repeatedly shows Himself to be a "God who makes space for —no, who *enjoys*—

diversity.”⁵ Seen in this light, the Babel and Pentecost stories can both be interpreted as God’s push to get his people to spread. The centrality of language both in God’s love of diversity and in response to his instruction to spread is the foundation for learning language.⁶ Building on the Pentecost account and two parables highlighted by Smith and Carvill (Luke 10 and Matthew 25), I now wish to move towards an examination of the placement of these passages, which is mentioned merely in passing in *The Gift of the Stranger*.⁷

Acts 2: Diversity, universality and language

In Luke’s account of the Acts of the Apostles, “the divine activity that began with Jesus and continues through the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the church is a continuation of God’s story that began in the Old Testament.”⁸ As Pentecost echoes previous directives to both “love the stranger” and “bless the nations”, it also shows the beginning of a more focused ministry to the Gentiles.⁹ The structure and progression of the Acts narrative establish a “continually forward movement from its Jewish setting based in Jerusalem with Peter as its leading figure toward a predominantly Gentile church, with Paul as the leading figure, and with Rome, the capital of the Gentile world, as the goal.”¹⁰ Thus, the linguistic empowerment of the Spirit at Pentecost serves as the supernatural nudge to push the Palestinian Jews out of their cultural comfort zones. They must rethink the exclusionary, isolationist practice of their religion (and, to some extent, their languages) in order to spread the Gospel to other people groups. “The empowerment of the Spirit to get the message beyond the narrow cultural boundaries of Palestinian Judaism... will take other forms as the book of Acts unfolds. What is interesting is that it starts with language.”¹¹

To realize the “forward movement,” any plan to carry the message to all peoples necessarily includes crossing the language barrier, recognizing the impact that hearing the message in their own language can have for the listeners. Speaking the language of the listeners, especially when preaching the message in the vernacular, is an effective way to minister to people, as hearing one’s native tongue spoken is also a way to experience a concrete expression of God’s love. This being the case, we are also called to love those who are foreigners or strangers in our midst, as they are our neighbors.

Luke 10: Challenges of being “neighbors”

The term “neighbor” in the biblical arena has a wide applicability. Even Samaritans, whom many Jews relegated to a distinctly lower status, were to be considered neighbors, as we learn from Jesus in Luke 10. Fee and Stuart underscore the “telling way” in which the parable of the Good Samaritan “exposes the smug self-righteousness of the lawyer” and challenges him to move beyond his insular cultural comfort zone.¹² They continue:

You will have to appreciate how contemptuously the Pharisees held the Samaritans if you are going to hear what he heard. Notice that he [the lawyer] does not even bring himself to use the word Samaritan at the end.¹³

An attitude of superiority is precisely what is revealed in the heart of the lawyer. Jesus’ reply comes as a slap in the face for someone seeking to “justify himself”:

The second greatest commandment is to love one’s neighbor as oneself. The lawyer had neat little systems that allowed him to love within limits. What Jesus does is to expose the prejudice and hatred of his heart, and therefore his real lack of obedience to this commandment. ‘Neighbor’ can no longer be defined in limiting terms. His lack of love is not that he will not have helped the man in the ditch, but that he hates Samaritans (and looks down on priests).¹⁴

Jesus specifically attempts to expand this “love within limits” by turning the question back to his listener: “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” In this way he draws specific attention to the fact that it is the Samaritan who is the neighbor, “the one who had mercy on him.”¹⁵

The expert in the law serves an example of one who, although he has heard the message, cannot take it in. He is neither willing nor ready to move out of his cultural comfort zone to love his neighbor. His refusal to love the stranger, his Samaritan neighbor, takes on added poignancy in the light of Matthew 25.

Matthew 25: Treatment of the Stranger and Judgment

In Matthew 25, the biblical text suggests that, along with fulfilling

the first commandment to “love the LORD your God,” one additional basis for separating the “sheep” from the “goats” will be the treatment of the stranger. For proper treatment, the gift is eternal life; for poor treatment, the curse is eternal punishment. Although the text does suggest that Jesus requires a tangible kind of love for the stranger (offering food, clothing and drink), an equally key measure of treatment of the stranger is how well he is welcomed. Note the depiction of a universal gathering: “all nations will be gathered before him [the Son of Man]” when he “comes in his glory” to “sit on his eternal throne” (v. 32). This is yet another indication that the message is for all peoples, “every nation, tribe and tongue,”¹⁶ not just a select, monolingual group. It assumes that there are neighbors, strangers or “brothers” from cultures all around the world, and that we are to welcome them all equally. It is naïve to assume that the “stranger” - regardless of whether at home or abroad - is always going to speak the same language as we. Whereas physical needs may be met through gestures, no truly deep connection can be made, and the welcome will only be partially extended. If we are unable to speak words of comfort in the stranger’s native language while meeting his physical needs, then our expressions of love for the stranger will be halting and self-centered, rather than fluent and truly other-centered.

Conclusions

So, then, how do these three passages examined fit together in support of foreign language study? Acts 2 displays God’s love of diversity and the importance he places on speaking to all peoples in all places *in their own language*. Luke 10 presents a new conception of “neighbor” as anyone, including the foreigner, who acts as a blessing to another. Matthew 25 explains that one basis for judgment will be our treatment of the stranger, particularly the extent to which we make the stranger feel welcome. If our goal as Christians is to be among the righteous who inherit eternal life, we will welcome the stranger as fully as possible, expect to be blessed by these “neighbors” as we do so, and carry out this ministry to speakers of other languages. Yet none of this will happen with any depth if we are ignorant of the other’s language.

Not only do these selections have something to say about the need for foreign language, more importantly, their location in the biblical text is suggestive. These texts are linked with the birthing and founding of the Church (Acts 2), the bases for inheriting eternal life (Luke 10), and the Final Judgment (Matthew 25). The junctures where these passages appear are critical because they imply that God is concerned about language. The

contexts in which the question of the stranger arises suggest that love for the stranger is a weighty issue, adding heft to the case for foreign language in the Core.

NOTES

¹ I am indebted to personal discussions with David I. Smith for elaboration of this argument.

² David I. Smith and Barbara Carvill, *The Gift of the Stranger* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 10-12. Here the authors trace the repeated mandates to “love the stranger” and “bless the nations” in passages throughout the Old Testament (Exod. 22:21, 23:9; Lev. 19:33-34; Deut. 10:19, 24:17, 27:19), then show how Jesus handles them (“blessing the nations,” Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47; “welcoming the stranger,” Jn. 4:1-42 and Luke 7:1-10.)

³ Smith and Carvill, p. 58.

⁴ Smith and Carvill, Chapter One.

⁵ Smith and Carvill, p. 5.

⁶ Smith and Carvill, p.14-15.

⁷ Smith and Carvill, p. 13.

⁸ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), p. 98.

⁹ Whereas Isaiah 42:6 does lay a significant foundation for any sort of outreach in this direction, spelling out the task of the Servant to, among other things, be “a light for the Gentiles,” it is the Acts passage which introduces the role of language in this mission.

¹⁰ Fee and Stuart, p. 141.

¹¹ Elaine Phillips, personal communication.

¹² Fee and Stuart, p. 141.

¹³ Fee and Stuart, p. 142. To follow up on Fee and Stuart’s suggestion, see also II Kings 17 and Ezra 4:1-5 regarding the origins of the repugnance of the Jews towards the Samaritans.

¹⁴ Fee and Stuart, p. 142.

¹⁵ Smith and Carvill, p. 13.

¹⁶ See, for example, Revelation 5:9, 7:9, 11:9, 13:7, 14:6.