

FORUM

The Forum is intended to promote dialogue by providing space for shorter pieces of writing including opinions and suggestions, brief responses to papers, reports of research in progress, meditations, and descriptions of pedagogical strategies.

Text-based vs. Thematic/Theological Activities for the FL Classroom: Finding the Right Fit

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In what might be a direct challenge for us as Christian foreign language teachers, Dennis Nineham¹ pointedly addresses “the use—or possible *mis*-use—of the Bible by Christian readers, or at any rate people who read in the hope of receiving religious enlightenment” and “attempt to derive more or less directly from the Bible... the norms of Christian belief and behaviour” (40-41). On what levels do we use the Bible, and are we as Christian foreign language teachers ever guilty of “misuse”?

Believing that “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (II Timothy 3:16), we as Christian educators must allow it to impact our students’ hearts, and in turn, their beliefs and behaviors. It is easy to present, and potentially “misuse,” Scripture as merely another text, mining it for grammatical and syntactical models without regard for its message and practical application in our lives: what is rather more difficult to achieve, is a well-designed, seamless integration of Scriptural materials into thematic/theological units appropriate for different levels of language study. The former requires only a superficial look at Scrip-
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ture. The latter requires a much deeper examination of the text and an application of its principles for the cogent presentation of our faith journeys, and an exploration of ethical issues.

I wish to pose a challenge that we FL teachers not content ourselves with only introductory, comfortable activities without ever arriving at matters that would shape the beliefs and behaviors of our students. I briefly sketch some activities I have explored in my own classroom and evaluate their effectiveness. I present some problematic issues, mainly extra-linguistic in nature, which may surface when moving towards a more thoughtful integration of themes/theology.

Methodologies

Text-based activities such as Scripture reading and passage memorization, Christian songs or praise choruses, and prayer and devotionals, not to mention routine instruction, provide effortless ways of using “Christian” content in the target language. Many of these activities could be deemed “add-ons,” for, in and of themselves, they neither change nor challenge the traditional FL curriculum. Even if they afford students the opportunity to absorb the structures and to increase/practice their comprehension, their mere appearance in the FL classroom does not necessarily privilege the text as the Living Word.

In an attempt to make the connections between text and themes/theology more evident in my own Spanish classes, I have created units designed to expand my students’ mastery of vocabulary and structures they will need in order to discuss issues of faith and worldview in Spanish. For example, in the second- and third-semester Spanish courses, students learn to speak about their faith journeys as a way of personalizing and reviewing the preterit/imperfect and compound tenses. My intermediate students cull the Psalms for relevant vocabulary and grammatical models for communication in religious contexts and keep a prayer journal.² In the Advanced Conversation course, students are given repeated opportunities to explore issues of faith in small groups by examining Christian responses to current news events. During the Current Events unit, students not only follow one major news article (such as the crisis in the Anglican Communion, Gay Marriage, and the 2004 US Presidential Elections) on CNN *en español*, but also track the story from at least two foreign (non-U.S.) news sources. In this way, they acquaint themselves with the sequence of events and pertinent vocabulary, and broaden their perspective. Lastly, students prepare discussion questions and Biblical passages in-

tended to probe and expand their classmates' thoughts on the matters.

Effectiveness

Although students generally make tremendous linguistic gains during these units, and end-of-semester course evaluations record that students have both enjoyed and appreciated the activities, I have been disappointed by what I perceive as a lack of depth in their interactions with each other and in the final products they submit. All too often, their projects reflect that, instead of assessing, elaborating and communicating a deeper, sustained Christian perspective, students are far more comfortable engaging in inadequate substitutes such as:

- limiting their expressions to undeveloped, simple structures,
- repeating the viewpoints of Christian experts and scholars in the field,
- relying on commonplaces reflecting widely held, mainstream views, or
- skirting “gray” issues, redefining them in simpler black and white terms.³

Given that the units are expressly devoted to equipping students linguistically, I will dismiss the possibility that students feel unable to express themselves and articulate their own opinions as clearly as they would in English due to language barriers. Rather, my suspicion is that students are resistant to or tentative about making public their own views in the FL due to extralinguistic developmental issues. Although it is hard to ascertain precisely what those issues are, several possibilities come to mind: fear, lack of personal confidence, or inadequate preparation to engage sophisticated arguments. Regardless of the reasons behind their developmental lag, it remains clear that our task as Christian educators is to urge students on to the next level of their faith, by meeting their needs, be they linguistic or perhaps more conceptual or affective in nature.

Additional Issues:

Students resist being graded on their faith.

My students have resisted the idea that both the content and the articulation of their faith statement or position on an issue will be evaluated because they feel their Christianity and their salvation are being scrutinized. In their terms, “faith shouldn’t be graded.” Thus they would be far more comfortable were the assigned topic neutral rather than personal.

For example, in the prayer journal activity, I have heard mutterings from students that I am grading them on their spirituality. I referred them back

to the grading rubric for this assignment, which was developed using the OPI proficiency scale. The rubric offers the following descriptors for the highest categories: “High level of sophistication, showing mastery of all tenses and moods; attempts to form constructions covering hypothetical situations with paragraph-level development.” The middle range of the scale shows student speech characterized by “typical/model present subjunctive constructions and all verb tenses, but with minor difficulties. No sustained, prolonged or supported paragraph-length thoughts” or confined “to accurate, yet simpler, sentences and constructions, mainly to form lists (such as *Gracias por...* with little elaboration).” When presented this way, it is easier for students to observe that the grade depends not on content, but rather on elaboration, since that is the marker for linguistic sophistication. It becomes less a matter of what students write, but of how much and/or how well they write it. When learning outcomes and grading criteria are clearly stated, students know what role their expression of faith versus their language skills plays in relation to their grades.

Students need space for both product and process.

Students require sufficient space to articulate what they are learning and the intellectual and affective effects it has on them. At times, the activities I design are focused on improving the rote language skill of the students. One such linguistic transformation activity I have students perform during the prayer unit involves changing the list of things God has done (present perfect or preterit verb form) into an expression of thanks (*Gracias por* + infinitive).⁴ This drill merely targets the practice of the grammatical concept, not development of a reasoned, cogent argument or thesis. If, as stated above, the unit is conceived to address both content and language, then students must be given adequate time and space to think through their views. Ideally, then, all tasks would spiral from the mechanical, concrete level to the abstract, conceptual level. So in the case of the Thanksgiving activity, students would eventually be encouraged to expand upon their “Thanks for sending your Son” by sharing a reaction or anecdote about why they are thankful God did this. In this way students would combine the linguistic with the personal.

Students need guidance.

When plumbing the depths of their faith, students also need direction and reassurance. Activities designed to help them process their learning can serve as intermediate steps through which to guide students. In this way,

even those who consider it unjust to be graded on spiritual development would, in the least, be afforded the opportunity to seek direction in developing a more substantiated worldview. Likewise, a processing component provides a venue through which to redirect those students who were merely repeating an expert view as opposed to internalizing it. Astute students know that it is easy to “talk Christian-ese” even without fully comprehending or embracing the meaning behind the words. Students quickly grasp the lingo, even in a FL, without necessarily having to think it through and make it their own, and pay lip service to the terms without internalizing and interacting with the content.

For example, the student whose prayers initially only list items under the Thanksgiving component, can be encouraged to elaborate the list with a more sophisticated structure or to rework these conceptually juvenile thoughts into one of the other categories. Remaining in the Thanksgiving category, the simplistic phrase “Thanks for sending your Son” can be reworked into “Thank you that you sent your Son” (a subjunctive construction). Moving to the category of Adoration, the phrase can be modified into a personal reaction of “It is marvelous that you sent your Son” (also using the subjunctive). A lengthier exposition of this basic idea would implement both greater linguistic mastery and deeper theological content, as in, “Had you not sent your Son to die for us, we would still be enslaved to sin.”

In the Current Events unit, a student who, by turning the discussion into a debate over homosexuality, sidesteps the issue of rights and benefits afforded in gay marriage can be redirected to the topic at hand through Biblical passages on caring for the marginalized and oppressed. Likewise, the international student who declines participation in the same debate because, “In my country we don’t have homosexuals,” can be invited to see himself as part of a global community where issues are not geographically-contained.

Conclusion

As FL educators at a Christian college we are responsible not only for increasing our students’ factual knowledge and skills in the language, but also for shaping and encouraging their spiritual growth. It is all too easy to shirk this duty, which may lead to the false expectation that students are ready for spiritual depth without guidance. But as we move them from text-based “add-on” activities to more integrated themes and theological discussions, we must give them feedback on the process and encourage them to produce a deeper product. The result will be a fuller integration of their faith with classroom assignments, moving ever closer towards receiving religious enlighten-

ment and deriving the norms of Christian belief and behaviour from the Bible.

NOTES

1 Nineham, Dennis. *The Use and Abuse of the Bible*. (London: MacMillan, 1976).

2 This was the unit on prayer entitled “Lord, help them with the subjunctive!” which I presented at 2001 NACFLA Conference held at Wheaton. The unit leads students through grammar and vocabulary needed to compose their own prayers following the 4 components of prayer of the ACTS model (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication).

3 Students seem to resort to these strategies when dealing with weighty matters, often as either comic relief or as a distancing technique from the topic, almost as if to say, “We haven’t figured out what the ‘right’ viewpoint is, but we know it’s not that.”

4 Some concrete examples: “Dios envió a su Hijo.” (“God sent his Son”)—> “Gracias por enviar a su Hijo.” (“Thanks for sending your Son.”) Or, “Dios ha hecho el sol” (“God has made the sunshine.”)—> “Gracias por hacer el sol” (“Thanks for making the sunshine.”)