

Using ESL for Evangelism

Without the Bible

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Introduction

The Bible is often used as a “textbook” for teaching English. In some situations, this is a legitimate way of teaching both English and the Scriptures. For many other situations, however, such an approach is undesirable. The purpose of this workshop is to consider another approach to teaching ESL that still allows both evangelism and pre-evangelism to take place.

I. Why have ESL without the Bible?

- A. To increase the number of internationals with whom we will have contact.

Many persons will shy away from ESL programs that use the Bible as a study book. Moslems, for example, are wary of Christians to begin with. Although they want to learn English, such an overt evangelistic method will turn them away from us and send them to other sources for what they want.

- B. To avoid ethical dilemmas over the nature of our teaching.

We need to be especially careful about any promotion of ESL classes that advertises teaching of English but does not specifically mention the Bible. Inviting internationals to our English classes and then springing a specifically religious “text” on them is a breach of trust.

II. What can be used for instructional materials?

Anything—literally! The instructor can use published ESL materials appropriate to the level of the student. Or he can use materials of his own making, taking advantage of almost anything written in English—except an overt use of the Bible.

Suggested Sources . . .

Newspaper and magazine articles, other materials from the media

Traditional stories, folk tales

Bible *stories*, especially those that are familiar to the population in general; reprint them so you are not using the Bible itself as the text.

Published stories (but be careful about the use of copyrighted materials).

Stories from your own imagination

Video clips

Internet sources for ESL

III. If the Bible cannot be used, how can evangelism possibly take place?

- A. One way evangelism takes place is the same way Jesus intended for it to take place in other aspects of life—through being salt and light.



“You are the light of the world . . . Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” (Matt. 5:14-16).



Implications for teaching . . .

The manner in which you teach and your attitude toward students can go a long way towards identifying good character and kindness with Christianity. Patience and a friendly face will invite further interaction and keep your students coming.

- B. Another way evangelism takes place is through the development of curiosity about God, Jesus, and the Bible. Here is where the ESL instructor has unlimited opportunity to introduce Christianity.

1. Through the language itself.

English is full of idioms that have their source in the Bible and in Christian belief.

Go beyond teaching the vocabulary / idiom to indicating its origin.

Example: A radio broadcast in Portland, OR told of a collision between a pickup and a truck on a major highway. All occupants of the pickup were killed, but two *good Samaritans* rescued the truck driver from his burning vehicle.

A news broadcast is public material. The announcer assumes that the listeners will know what a Good Samaritan is, but ESL students may not. Here the teacher has a natural opportunity to present the story of the Good Samaritan as taught by Jesus.

2. Through proverbs.

Every culture has proverbs that sum up that civilization’s folk wisdom and cultural values. Take advantage of the student’s curiosity about American proverbs to show where those proverbs come from. Be sure to include all kinds of proverbs, not just those from the Bible. Work them in naturally to whatever else is being studied.

Examples:

A stitch in time saves nine. — Benjamin Franklin
Do to others what you want others to do to you. — Jesus
A good name is more desirable than great riches. — Solomon

3. Through taking advantage of student questions that arise naturally in the course of the lessons.

Example: One class was going over the English version of Aesop’s fable, “The Boy Who Cried Wolf.” The story included a sentence about the boy’s watching the sheep in the fold. One of the students consulted his Japanese dictionary for a definition of *fold*. “My dictionary says *fold* means *church*,” he said, with a question in his voice.

How would you handle this?

4. Through the use of well-known Bible stories.

Students need to know that knowledge of some of the major Bible stories is necessary in order to understand much of English literature. This is especially true for those who are studying or plan to study in a US college or university. Once you get into the story, you can build upon its details to develop further curiosity and interest in God. (I recommend that you *not* present the story directly from the Bible. Present it as you would other material.)

Example: Noah’s flood. Even though most of the U.S. population don’t believe it as a true story, they know about it. They know about the ark and about the animals, about Noah and about the rain. Since references to Noah show up in literature, knowledge of him is essential. (Consider the popularity of Noah’s ark themes in interior decoration for children’s rooms. One could even bring a sample of such items as an illustration.)

5. Through the use of names.

Names, in other cultures as well as our own, have meanings. Some cultures place great importance upon the meaning of a person’s name. We can take advantage of this to introduce the meaning of biblical names, or even confirm the positive meaning of a student’s name.

Example: A young Japanese woman who had just arrived in America with very limited English was introduced as Naomi. Even though her Japanese name meant something different, the fact that it matched an English name became an opportunity.

“You have a Bible name!” she was told.

“Bible? Name?” She knew the two words but couldn’t put them together.

“Yes, your name is in the Bible. Do you know what the Bible is?”

“Yes,” she responded. She went on in broken English. “Bible . . . book . . . church.”

“That’s right. *Naomi* is the name of a woman in the Bible. She was a good woman, and her name means *pleasant*.”

“Oh, I’m so happy it has good meaning!”

From this brief introduction to Naomi arose an interest in finding out more about this woman who had her same name. She willingly received a Bible and was pointed to the book of Ruth. (Take advantage of diglot translations in such situations.)

6. Through use of personal experience and family incidents. Students will be interested in your family.

Example: A class of women students had a reading assignment involving a character named Samuel. My son and his wife had just adopted a baby boy and named him Samuel. The same name provided an opportunity for me to tell the story of the adoption and the reason for their choosing that name. That led to their wanting to hear the story of the original Samuel. One Chinese woman, hearing the story for the first time, was intrigued by God’s answering Hannah’s prayer. “Is true?” she asked. “Yes, it’s true.”

7. Through the discussion of events that happen within the students’ environment.

Example: In the spring, one of the young women who had been working as a volunteer in our international Coffeehouse died of snakebite on a work-study program in Indonesia. Her death opened the door to discuss death, views of death, customs surrounding death in the students’ countries, and—as it developed naturally in the conversation—a Christian’s readiness for death.

8. Through the explanation of American holidays.

Even secular holidays usually have a religious aspect or Christian adaptation. Any discussion of a holiday would be incomplete without including the Christian background and observance.

Example: Close to Christmas, in a very unusual circumstance, all but one of the students in an ESL class were absent. The one who came was Muslim. A discussion had been planned about Christmas symbols, with the hope that this would lead to further openings to talk about the meaning of Christmas. Would it work with only one woman there? God knew in advance that she would be the only one there even though the instructor did not. An opportunity developed for a very detailed explanation of Christ’s coming to earth.

IV. Some general principles for making this approach work.

- A. We need to be convinced that God is working even when there is no overt evidence.

- B. We need to be *very* flexible, allowing time for getting “sidetracked.”
- C. We need to be convinced that *all* of the Word of God is beneficial for teaching truth about God (not just the traditional salvation sections) and that God will use the “seeds” that we plant.
- D. We need to recognize that everything has potential for becoming an opportunity to direct one’s thinking toward God because God is involved in every aspect of our lives—and of our students’ lives.

Sample situations

Consider the following situations that you might encounter in your English class. What *natural* opportunity do you see here for teaching biblical truth?

1. You are teaching the names of parts of the human body.
2. In your reading material, the characters are named Daniel and Michael.
3. You have come across the phrase, “wolf in sheep’s clothing.”
4. You have a story in which a grandfather considers his granddaughter “the apple of his eye.”
5. In a newspaper report about an incident in which you think your students will be interested, someone has been referred to as a Judas.
6. You find out your student’s name in her own language means “daughter of wisdom.”
7. Your students have heard on the news that in one state there is a battle going on over the hanging of the Ten Commandments in a courtroom.
8. The students’ Buddhist friend has been killed in an automobile accident.
9. A student has volunteered information that she and her husband are of the Sikh religion.
10. You are describing American weddings to your students.
11. Easter is coming, and your students ask you about all the rabbits and eggs they see in decorations in the stores.
12. A news analyst comments on the suggestion that multinational troops could be used in Iraq. He says, “It would be a veritable Tower of Babel.”

Suggested approaches

1. Noting the “Adam’s apple” could lead to telling the story of Adam and Eve and their disobedience to God.
2. *Daniel* and *Michael* are both biblical names with the Hebrew word for God as part of the name (*El*). *Daniel* means *God is my Judge*, while *Michael* means *Who is like God?* Discussing the names could lead into stories from *Daniel* or a discussion of angels and archangels.
3. Jesus talked about wolves in sheep’s clothing in Matt. 7:15, referring to false prophets. This could lead into a discussion of truth and how to distinguish truth from lies.
4. This phrase actually comes from the Bible (Deut. 32:10, Ps. 17:8, Prov. 7:2, Zech. 2:8) with varying applications. Prov. 7:2 could be used to show how we should regard wisdom — something precious and valuable in our sight.
5. Tell the story of Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of Jesus.
6. Discuss wisdom: What is the difference between knowledge and wisdom? Where does wisdom come from?
7. You could teach the Ten Commandments themselves. Since King James English is usually used even by non-Christians in quoting the Ten Commandments, you could use this opportunity to introduce the old pronouns that are now replaced by *you* and *your*.
 - Thou — subject
 - Thee — object
 - Thy, thine — possessive; *thy* before consonants, *thine* before vowels.
8. Discuss funeral customs and death. What does the Buddhist believe about the destiny of the dead? Compare this with Christian teachings.
9. If this is a group, ask other students what religions they follow and, if they are willing, have them tell some of the main teachings of their religion. Teach the words *agnostic* and *atheist* and the suffix *-ism*. Depending upon the interest and response of the students, this could be developed further.
10. Describe church weddings and the traditional vows. (A *vow* is a promise given before witnesses, and in the context of a wedding, God is invoked as a witness.) Give the meaning of “until death do us part.”
11. Explain the pagan and Christian origins of Easter and Easter customs. Share the story of the crucifixion and resurrection. If you are doing this near Easter, try inviting students to a Passion Play or other Easter celebration. Explain the popularity of Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus” at Easter.
12. Tell the biblical story of the building of the tower of Babel. Explain the biblical concept that disobedience to God brings consequences. (The people had been told after the Flood to spread out over the earth. Instead, they congregated together in one place for the exact opposite purpose, in defiance of God.)