

Ethical Considerations in Church-Based Adult ESL Programs

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In discussing the ethical and professional implications of incorporating spirituality in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), significant criticism has been directed at CET (Christian English Teachers) who attempt to proselytize students while teaching in secular contexts, especially in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) settings (Edge, 2003; Pennycook & Makoni, 2005, Varghese & Johnston, 2007). While there has been some investigation of church-based adult ESL programs in the US and Canada (Baurain, 2013; Chao & Kuntz, 2013; Chao & Mantero, 2014; Kristjánsson, 2003, under contract), no research has been focused specifically on the ethical implications of the use of Bible- or Christianity-centered content in such programs.

Although it might logically be argued that church-based ESL programs have ethical freedom to center their courses around the Bible or Christian themes (Ferris, 2009; Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2003), this paper will present arguments both from a Christian and professional standpoint to encourage careful consideration of the potential ramifications of doing so when classes are open to the public and the primary goal is to meet the needs of a religiously diverse community. This paper will investigate the characteristics, mission and goals of church-based ESL programs, how Christian and Bible-based content is included in classes, potential ethical pitfalls and consequences, and guiding principles for church-based ESL programs to consider when deciding how and whether to include faith-based content in their curriculum.

Overview of Church-Based ESL Programs

The information provided below is based on case studies involving church-based ESL programs (Baurain, 2013; Chao & Kuntz, 2013; Chao & Mantero, 2014; Kristjánsson, under contract) as well as internet research identifying churches with such programs. Information related to the Perimeter Church ESL Program was provided via email by the director of the

program to the author of this paper (Kam, 2017). The overview provided here does not intend to apply to all church-based ESL programs, but it is hoped that a sufficiently broad spectrum of programs is represented in order to depict the diversity of this type of church ministry.

Mission and Goals of Church-Based Programs

An investigation of church-based programs yields a discovery of a few key motivations that have prompted churches to start ESL ministries/programs. These statements of mission or purpose tend to fall into one of three categories: meeting learner needs, demonstrating God's love, and connecting people to God and the church.

Meeting needs in the community.

At one of the church-based sites studied by Kristjánsson (under contract), volunteer teacher/tutors describe being motivated by a desire to fill the need gap created by the lack of ESL classes offered in the area. Another site conducted an interest survey in the church's neighborhood and many respondents indicated significant interest in an ESL program. Bethel Christian Reformed Church started their ESL program as a means of meeting the needs of both church members and immigrants by combining English and Spanish language practice. The program website describes a desire to "meet the needs of all individuals while teaching each other, learning from one another, and building relationships in Christ" (Bethel Christian Reformed Church). South Dayton Presbyterian Church similarly describes the mission of their ESL program as "offering the love of Christ by meeting a real need in our world today" (South Dayton Presbyterian Church).

Practical demonstration of God's love.

Another motivation for launching an ESL program is as a means to show God's love to others. As Christian churches seek to find ways to put their faith into action, for some, an ESL outreach fits perfectly within this goal. Participants in Kristjánsson's (under contract) study began the process of launching their church-based ESL program by brainstorming ways to show the love of Jesus in a practical way. They described the classes as a way to show Christian love by befriending students and helping them in whatever way possible. Baurain (2013) found that tutors saw their work with ESL learners "as a way of serving God by serving people" (p. 145) and that tutors were motivated to model Christian actions and values for their students. A teacher in one of the programs studied by Chao & Mantero (2014) listed the program's main objectives as 1) building trust with immigrants in their community and 2) demonstrating Christ's love.

Connecting learners to the church and God.

Many church-based programs have a stated aim to introduce students to the Christian faith and integrate them into their church fellowship. Moore (2005) notes that Church-based ESL programs often grow into new church plants. Although this has not happened yet at Perimeter Church, leaders of the ESL program have observed participation by some students in church Christmas programs, Sunday worship services, a special Sunday School class designed specifically for ESL students and taught by ESL program teachers, and a women's Bible study. Kam articulates this goal of seeing students ultimately drawn toward Christianity and into the church:

Our intention is to build an ESL family where students feel comfortable to develop relationships with their classmates and teachers while improving their English

ability, and of course we pray for them to feel comfortable to investigate Christianity by staying for the Bible session. (Kam, 2017)

As such, church-based ESL programs can act as a bridge between classes and the church itself, creating an environment where students can gradually learn more about Christianity and the church.

In his handbook for Bible-based ESL programs, Eby (2003) defines the goal of such programs as follows: “to present Jesus Christ to people and disciple new believers” (p. 15). In the current discussion, however, a distinction needs to be made between *church-based* ESL programs and *Bible-based* ESL programs. While a church-based program may choose to follow a Bible-based curriculum, this is not the choice of all church-based programs.

Inclusion of Christian Content in Classes

Not all church-based programs are cut from the same mold. Some offer classes comparable to those you might find at a secular learning center with very little--if any--formal inclusion of spiritual content, while others seek to use classes as a means of introducing learners to Christianity and a gospel message. Representing the many points along this spectrum are programs that limit Christian content in classes, but allow for optional participation in classes or activities of a Christian nature.

The ESL program at Perimeter Church which May Chun Kam and her husband coordinate is one example of the middle area of this spectrum. The program offers 14 classes ranging from beginning to advanced, with 246 students enrolled in the program this year, a majority being professionals from mainland China. Most are parents or grandparents of children enrolled in Saturday Chinese classes which are held at the church building, but not affiliated with Perimeter

Church itself. All teachers (around 30 program-wide) are volunteers. While no Christian content is included in the regular ESL classes, Perimeter Church also offers an optional ESL Bible class following the regular ESL classes. During registration, program volunteers make it clear that teachers will use the Bible or Bible-related material during the 2nd session and that attendance is optional. Students are invited to attend the ESL Bible session in addition to the regular ESL classes if they are interested and Kam reports that more than half of the students who attend ESL classes stay for the Bible session. In addition, the program holds a prayer meeting for the teachers each week before ESL classes start (Kam, 2017).

On the end of the spectrum representing less inclusion of Christian content, First Baptist Church opts to allow students to take the initiative “to ask spiritual questions, come to international dinners, and participate in the church” if they are interested in learning more about Christianity (First Baptist Church Amherst). Kristjánsson (under contract) also reports that the director of the program in her study generally opts not to include Christian activities in classes unless there is a biblical concept that fits with the theme being studied. The motive of this choice is to help Muslim, Buddhist and nonreligious students feel comfortable in the learning environment. Instead, teachers demonstrate their faith by praying for students if they are open to or request prayer. In his study, Baurain (2013) also found that “proselytizing was not observed within the program and conversations with spiritual content were rare” (p. 149).

On the end of the spectrum representing inclusion of more faith-based content, Chao & Mantero (2014) reported that one program used Bible verses written on the board in Spanish according to the teacher “as a way to ‘build a bridge. . . [to let] them know that we appreciate where they’re coming from” (p. 105). The students interviewed responded positively to this approach, communicating that they felt that their language was respected and valued in this way.

This openness to biblical class content could be attributed to the fact that participants in this program were primarily from Latin American countries and possibly from a Catholic background, or at least acquainted with the Christian faith and comfortable with religious references.

Among churches that include Christian and biblical content in classes, there is a wide range of approaches and techniques represented. Moore (2005) advocates for using secular curriculum from prominent publishers, while supplementing with Christian elements such as prayer, listening/speaking activities based on parables of Jesus, scripture posters, Christian songs, devotionals, and scripture verse readings. Although Eby (2003) discusses how to implement a Bible-based curriculum and provides a list of available resources to this end, he recommends maintaining a flexible and judicious approach, waiting to introduce biblical content until students become interested in learning more about the Christian faith.

Criticism of Christian English Teachers' Ethical Practices

Several prominent researchers in the field of ELT have criticized evangelical Christian English Teachers' (CET) motivations for teaching ESL/EFL, claiming that their main interest is "as a means to gain access to potential converts" (Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2003, p. 347), and that they are operating under notions of superiority (Ramanathan, 2009) and failing to respect students' cultural and religious beliefs (Varghese & Johnston, 2007).

This criticism has mainly been directed at CET teaching in secular EFL contexts, and Pennycook & Coutand-Marin (2003) acknowledge that proselytizing may in fact have a place in church-based ESL programs. Ferris (2009) and Kristjánsson (under contract) also allow that including Christian elements as a part of the course curriculum could be legitimate practice for

church-based programs. However, it seems wise for church-based ESL ministries to consider how these criticisms might help them to evaluate their programs and lead them to changes that would allow them to better serve students. As Robison (2009) pointedly asserts, “Christians do well to listen and reflect on the questions posed by their professional colleagues, with the aim of conducting their activities in a manner that is at once above reproach and consistent with their faith” (p. 255). The next section will investigate a few specific ways these criticisms may be applicable to church-based programs.

Potential Ethical Pitfalls and Consequences

From a professional standpoint, there are three main ways that church-based ESL programs could stray into the area of unethical practice: by failing to make the Christian nature of classes explicit, failing to adequately meet students’ learning needs, and pressuring students to accept Christianity. Any of these unethical practices could lead to students leaving the program or demonstrating a false interest in Christianity.

Failure to Inform Students of Christian-Based Content

The first responsibility of a program including Bible-based or Christian content as a part of its curriculum should be clear disclosure of this fact to potential students. Pergason (2009) advises, “[Bible-based] classes should not be part of a required curriculum and. . . accurate publicity is important so that students can choose the class for themselves and know what they are getting into before they enroll” (p. 190). Robison (2009) likewise encourages teachers and institutions to uphold a standard of truthfulness by presenting accurate and complete information that will allow students to make an informed decision. Withholding information about the

Christian nature of class content could easily feel like a betrayal of trust to students who unknowingly register for a course they assume will be a “normal” ESL class.

Failure to Meet Students’ Needs

Since meeting learners’ needs should be one of the primary goals of any ESL program (and is a stated goal of many of the church-based ESL programs investigated here), program leaders should avoid including Christian content at the expense of meeting students’ learning needs. Edge (2003) warns that learners “should be able to believe that their teachers. . . have not a priori downgraded students’ purposes to a secondary status in relation to their own. . . religious agendas” (p. 707). In other words, in providing a service to the community, church-based programs must be willing to prioritize what class participants wish to learn. Since most students enroll with the objective of improving English skills needed for daily life, a focus on Bible lessons might not adequately serve this goal. However, if students demonstrate an interest in learning scripture verses or Bible stories, or if these relate to a cultural aspect of daily life, this would fit within an acceptable use of religious references (Foye, 2014). As Pergason (2009) advises, the undergirding principle for programs should be to “remember who their students are and what they need” (p. 189).

Pressuring Students to Accept Christianity

Although it appears that coercive tactics were not observable in most of the studies presented here, it is important that church-based programs examine their approach to make sure that students do not feel undue pressure from teachers to conform to their way of thinking. In his book addressing immigrant-focused missions, Payne (2012) cautions:

The church must not view migrants as a project or a way to accomplish a goal. . . . While we share the love of Jesus, calling all people to repent and place their faith in him, at no time are we to be coercive or manipulative. We are to care for other people whether or not they become followers of Jesus. Our service is to come with no strings attached. (p. 141)

While teachers may not feel that they are being “coercive or manipulative,” they need to consider how students themselves may feel. Mahboob (2009) shares his perspective as a non-Christian coming to see Christian friends as “nice” people with subtle ulterior motives, willing “to go to any lengths to make others see the world from their ‘true’ understanding” (p. 272). A student of a different faith who is participating in a class that heavily emphasizes Christianity may indeed feel pressured or uncomfortable even if that is not the teacher’s intention.

Consequence: Driving Students Away from the Program

In their study of church-based programs, Chao & Kuntz (2013) discovered that some students were resistant to the imposition of Christian content in classes and opted not to participate as a result. As there is often a high rate of student turnover in community ESL classes, it may be difficult to ascertain the reason students are leaving the program. However, it is logical to assume that if students feel uncomfortable with the material presented, they will simply stop attending.

Consequence: Motivation to Show False Interest in Christianity

Chao & Kuntz (2013) uncovered another startling fact: students may pretend interest in Christianity in order to access perceived power or privilege. This was demonstrated by one student in the study who admitted to lying about her religion on the registration form, writing

Christian rather than *Buddhist*. In her words, “if I indicate that I am a Christian, I would have more opportunities and gain more welcome. I thought the instructors would prefer those whose entry form says ‘Christians,’ I think” (p. 471-472). This alarming example emphasizes the caution required in order to avoid unconsciously communicating to students that Christians in the class are preferred over students of other faiths.

Guiding Principles for Church-Based ESL Programs

Based on the ethical considerations outlined above, what principles should guide decisions regarding if, when, and how to reference the Bible and Christianity in a church-based program? For Christians, it is important to consider both ethical and scriptural guidelines when making decisions about how to structure this type of ministry. There are four main guiding principles that can be drawn from both a professional and Christian perspective: be open about course content, put students’ needs first, avoid manipulation or coercion, and share the gospel with creativity and sensitivity.

Provide Clear Information about Course Content

In order to avoid misunderstanding regarding what kind of content will be taught in the ESL classes, programs should make sure that students are aware of the Christian nature of classes if that will be the case. Full disclosure is important in order to avoid intentional or unintentional deception. As followers of Christ, leaders of church-based ESL programs have a responsibility to speak openly about their intentions rather than trying to “trick” students into signing up for a Bible study unawares.

Keep Students' Needs Foremost

Church-based programs that are seeking to serve the community must determine the needs of learners and seek to effectively meet these needs. Eby (2003) urges, “everything you do is for one purpose: helping the students. Give the learner top priority in all your decisions about ESL teaching” (p. 20). Whether students need to learn how to navigate a doctor’s appointment, open a bank account, or read their child’s school newsletter, churches will present the best image of Christianity by helping students successfully meet these learning goals. Christ provides the ultimate example of selfless service for believers to follow: “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10:45, ESV).

Avoid Coercive or Manipulative Tactics

Students in church-based programs should feel respected and valued, regardless of their religious beliefs. Taking a tone in discussions of faith that is “respectful, interested, informative, and gentle” (Pergason, 2009; p. 188) will go a long way toward communicating this consideration. Baurain (2007) points out that any true conversion must be voluntary--never a result of deception or coercion--so respectful engagement is a necessary part of sharing the Christian faith. Furthermore, following the Biblical “Golden Rule” (“treat others the same way you want them to treat you” Luke 6:31, NASB) should lead Christians to consider how they would want to be treated if they found themselves in the same situation as their students (Smith, 2009).

Use Creativity and Sensitivity to Share the Gospel

For believers in Jesus, telling others about their faith in Christ and inviting them to accept this faith as their own is part of the Christian calling. Ferris (2009) states that “those who call

themselves Christians are not only entitled to share their beliefs with others but are arguably morally bound to do so” (p. 210). In the famous passage from Matthew 28 (commonly called the Great Commission), Jesus instructs believers to “go. . . and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20, ESV).

The question for Christian ESL teachers in church-based programs, then, is not *if*, but rather *how* and *when* they should verbalize this invitation to faith. Dornyei (2009) acknowledges this dilemma: “unfortunately, Paul never wrote a ‘Letter to TESOL’ and therefore Christian language teachers need to decide for themselves on the best strategy to follow the Great Commission” (p. 156). The best strategy for each individual program will vary depending on the students’ interest in spiritual discussions. Moore (2005) offers a few suggestions for how to discuss faith outside of the classroom, including visiting students at their home or the teacher inviting students to their home, and he concludes with the advice to “pray for guidance from the Holy Spirit about when, where, how and with whom to share your faith” (p. 175).

As the Perimeter Church ESL program puts these principles into practice, Kam (2017) is seeing positive results: “Many of our students have never attended any church or even seen a Bible before [and they are] coming to our ESL program. Through the dedication of our teachers, almost two thirds of the students stay for the Bible session. We have seen a few students come to faith in the past few years.” Through consideration of these same principles, other church-based ESL programs can also provide a quality service to meet students’ needs while demonstrating their faith in Christ in a practical way.

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Crossroads Community Church <http://www.crossroadspca.com/esl-classes>

English as a Second Language and Immigrant Ministries Eslim.org

First Presbyterian Church of Champaign <http://www.firstchurchchampaign.org/esl>

Hope Presbyterian Church <http://hopeaustin.org/esl-classes/>

St. Philip's United Methodist Church <http://www.spumc.com/education/english-second-language-esl/>

Woodland Baptist Church <http://woodlandbc.org/esl/>