Reflections on Teaching English as a Second Language in Korea

The Spirituality of Teaching English as a Second Language in Korea

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When I went to Korea in the summer of 1998 with my wife to spend time with her mother, who had been diagnosed with terminal cancer, an opportunity came up which allowed my wife to spend time alone with her mother and provided me a little more structure. I was asked by missionaries to participate in their intensive three-week English programme at a theological university. The programme was called Adventures in English, but it had at one time been called Missionary Training in English. It was basically an immersion programme in English with chapel services and a variety of courses ranging in content from translation to basic conversational English. Though the name had changed, the content of the programme had not, from what I
had been told. The original name suggested what the aim of the programme had been – to give Korean missionaries and theological students the skills to function in this international language. The exact reason for the name change came before my time, but underlying it was a desire to reach out to a larger demographic of students who were eager to learn English and to encourage them to do so in a Christian environment. What follows are some of my reflections on the use of ministry as a means of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) versus my own approach to teaching ESL as an English speaking Christian in Korea.

First, let me set the context. Speaking English well in Korea is as valuable as gold – literally. Although the economic rise of China and its proximity is starting to create a rival interest in learning Mandarin, speaking English well is still the linguistic necessity for a successful professional life. However, what children in English-speaking countries take for granted is an expensive and laborious-to-acquire skill in Korea. Those who can afford the high private academy fees or the expenses associated with studying abroad (4.5 billion U.S. dollars in 2008) gain the upper hand. This disparity in the ability to acquire English skills between the haves and the have-nots has been recently recognized by the Korean government through the issuing of new guidelines for university entrance requirements. Ironically, whereas the Korean government is trying to implement a system which creates equal opportunity, some universities, emphasizing the importance of English for students trying to enter the workforce in the age of globalization, have decided to use proficiency on the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) or similar standardized test scores as a requirement for graduation. I heard at an informal meeting recently that two hundred students at one university could not graduate because their scores were too low.

The importance of English is likewise reflected in the entrance and promotional structure of established companies. According to one large English educational company in Korea, 928 out of 1000 companies use the TOEIC as a determining factor for employment. The visiting University of British Columbia professor who gave this statistic rightfully queried whether many of these jobs require English proficiency. Once hired by a company, promotion is also often dependent on English ability. Those who have the technical expertise but not the English language skills as represented in high TOEIC
scores are passed over for promotion. My purpose here is not to judge whether the above government, university and business policies are effective or just, but rather to emphasize that at this point in Korea’s history, speaking English well is almost an indispensible skill for one’s professional life. It is this competitive environment to acquire proficiency in English which provides the background for my reflections.

One significant experience which helped me to articulate my understanding of the use of ministry as a means to teach English came from my earliest experiences of teaching ESL in the Mission English department at the theological university mentioned above. Contrary to the spiritual-sounding title, in the course of my teaching, there was almost no content that would be called overtly Christian except praying at the start of classes. We had solid secular texts and taught English from them. Nevertheless, the department was called Mission English and a new programme to help students learn English through a more spiritual means was decided upon – English chapel. I was asked to preach at the second monthly service, and I took the task seriously and gave it my best, so to speak.

I remember the event quite clearly. I approached the rostrum in the semi-circular chapel built of wood and in the Protestant style of the early twentieth century. I laid out my sermon notes, read the scripture, prayed and began to preach. I am no prince of preachers, to say the least, but I gave it everything I had that day. Clearly articulated English words seemed to roll effortlessly off my tongue. The only problem was that as I looked out on the audience of
around two hundred university students, a few missionaries and several professors, everyone’s eyes were glazed and their eyelashes drooping save for a handful. The old joke about the parishioner who called his pastor in the middle of the night and said, “Pastor, please preach to me. I can’t get to sleep,” probably sums up the spirit of those long twenty minutes for those listening. All jokes aside, I must have done a super job because I was asked to preach at several more (actually, at that time there was only one other theologically trained person at our school who could or would preach in English). I only accepted one of the offers and likewise turned down several opportunities to be the pastor of similarly focused English ministries in some rather large Korean churches. I might have preached at these types of services more, but when I considered the impact my preaching would have, I was not convinced that the spiritual benefits for those listening would match the hours that go into sermon preparation. Although I had great respect and admiration for the students, I was not comfortable with pursuing what I call ESL ministry.

These experiences helped me to articulate the tension that I had felt for some time, namely the difference between English ministry and ESL ministry. The former, I suggest, has as its focus the task of ministry through English, although the recipients might not be native English speakers, and the latter constitutes the task of teaching English through the medium of ministry. The difference may seem minute, but in my practical experience significant. Both may attract those who wish to learn English, but in English ministry learning English is incidental and in ESL ministry it is central. In English ministry, the focus remains where it should – on the spiritual benefits to those listening. Other differences between the two can be found in presuppositions, intentions, ministry experiences, expectations, preparation, focus, and in the constituency of group members. I am very eager to participate in English ministry, but I personally allocate ESL ministry to a lower priority.

On the other hand, evangelism through learning ESL seeks to use English instruction to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. What defines this type of focus is that evangelism is the central task and the target audience is defined as those who want to learn English and are not Christians. Of course, there is always the question as to what extent these programmes are transparent about their purpose to evangelize. Nevertheless, what is certain is that in some
places this means of evangelism has been effective. I once studied Japanese for a short stint from a tutor whose life bore the fruit of such an ESL outreach in Japan. Such stories abound both overseas and I’m sure in many English-speaking countries.

Yet, besides teaching English to those who are sympathetic to a Christian worldview or with the specific intent to evangelize, there remains the situation of the Christian who teaches in a professional setting with students indifferent to a Christian worldview. It is in this setting that I want to briefly outline how I see my call as a Christian educator, assuming that teaching English is the issue at hand and not a mere guise to evangelize.

I presently carry out my teaching of English at a Korean university whose original roots are solidly Christian. Its inception was through missionary endeavours in the early twentieth century. After the church split during the Korean independence movement, it developed into a stalwart church and, under the leadership of its pastor, Dr. Chi Sun Kim, a Presbyterian seminary was birthed. In the 1990s the transition to a general university was completed. Although the graduate school of theology is led by some very faithful and skilled Christian scholars and there remain some theologically focused undergraduate programmes, no particular faith commitment is required to study in most of the general programmes nor is it a requirement for the native English teachers who teach English at the university. Once again, my purpose is not to criticize the policies of the university, only to establish the context.

Some of my classes have students who are sympathetic to a Christian worldview and some do not. In teaching both types of students, I see incorporated into my task of teaching ESL the softer skill of the call to care for souls. I do not want to make light of the connotation and denotation that the care for souls carries for those who are familiar with its meaning in theological writings. Nevertheless, I find it a helpful term for defining my role as a Christian teacher. The care for souls is not just limited to those who have surrendered to and acknowledged the Kingdom of God but is a term broad enough to embrace evangelism, that is, the process of ushering a non-believer into the family of God. In this way, the spiritual well-being of each individual can be seen with in the task of teaching English, which occurs during a set time-period that the student is obliged to keep. In my case, this obligation extends over a semester of four months.

The question remains: With such a covert faith, how does the Christian teacher’s concern for the spiritual well-being of the students differ from a non-Christian teacher’s approach? After all, there are many non-Christians who are more committed to preparing for their classroom time, are genuinely concerned about their students’ welfare inside the class and outside, and are scrupulous in their practices. However, I believe the difference is in the ability of the Christian teacher to draw God into the lives of the students through prayer in a way which may not happen without prayer. Prayer sets the tone
for a holistic outlook which integrates the seemingly unspiritual task of teaching English with God’s plan for creation and, more specifically, for each student. In other words, it is the recognition that the classroom experience of learning English can influence the students outside of class and outside-of-class life experiences can influence the quality of the students’ classroom experience. Students who are perceptive in seeing this connection between classroom experiences and the rest of life are not only better learners but are in a position to better recognize God’s sovereignty and providence in both arenas.

In my own classes, I pray publically to begin classes of Christian majors and privately before classes of different majors. Prayer in itself, I have found, can also be an incidental form of evangelism. I have one student who chooses not to study English with the students in his major but rather in a class of Christian Education majors. I did not pray publically in the previous class that he attended, but I do in this one. Although he is not a Christian, he continues to stay. He understands that the majority of students are Christian Education majors who are more aware of a God-centred holistic view of life, even if it is not articulated. My hope and prayer is that he will make the connection between prayer and the reasons he wants to study in this class.

In my discussion of the care of souls as it pertains to ESL teaching, I have not tried to discuss the unique problems that arise from learning a new language and culture. These do add a certain distinct perspective to what I have written above. Nevertheless, there are ample texts out there that can do a far better job of discussing cross-cultural communication, delineating the difficulties involved, and explaining the hard technicalities of ESL. The wonderful thing about prayer, however, is that God is the ultimate linguist and prayer the ultimate form of communication.

Little did I know in the summer of 1998 that I would someday be teaching ESL as a temporary vocational focus. The mission organization which ran the programme Adventures in English for all practical purposes has closed down its mission in Korea after almost one hundred years of service. However, there are still many places where ESL with a Christian focus needs clarity and direction. In short, I have found it helpful to articulate the relationship between my call as an ESL teacher and my duty to care for souls. Thus with the task of teaching English in hand and a sensitivity to the Holy Spirit, I am able to teach the students English and serve God in furthering His Kingdom.