

# Scripture and Language Learning

**T**hirteen years ago, I was preparing to begin my work as the director of English as a Second Language (ESL) at Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska. I had taught “regular” English for many years, both on the high school and college levels, but this was a new experience for me. In this new role, I would be teaching and directing a program that helped international students polish their English language skills and prepared them for the academic rigors of university-level work.

To prepare for this new position, I took some courses in Teaching English as a Second Language, immersing myself in the methods and materials of the field. This was an invaluable experience that opened my eyes to the unique experience of learning English from an international student’s point of view. But I wanted to bring more to my students than just a knowledge of English. I wanted my classes to have mission and vision. I wanted my students to learn to know God. This quotation from Ellen White intrigued me: “In every line of instruction, teachers are to seek to impart light from the word of God.”<sup>1</sup> In every line of instruction? Even in teaching English as a Second Language? How

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could I incorporate God’s Word into an academic curriculum of reading, writing, grammar, speaking, and listening? Could the imparting of light from the Word of God fit with scholarly objectives?

## Setting the Tone for the Class

I decided to take this injunction literally and began a teaching practice that I still use today. In every class, before we study the main lesson of the day—reading, comprehension skills, or outlining a comparison/contrast essay, we begin with prayer requests, prayer, a song, and Scripture. This typically takes about 10 or 15 minutes, but in my opinion, it’s the best part of the class. This time sets the tone for instruction and interaction in the classroom. Students who have come to class with a heavy burden are able to share their concerns. The songs, which are usually

short choruses, lift up their hearts. Often during the rest of the hour, I hear students humming the melody.

However, I believe the greatest blessing in my classes has been the use of Scripture. Not only does it provide an opportunity for students to meditate on the meaning of God’s Word and its poetic beauty, but it also provides them with an opportunity to explore language issues and adds to their understanding of English



**After writing a Scripture passage, a Union College (Lincoln, Nebraska) ESL student from Brazil checks the spelling and punctuation with her teacher, Peggy Wahlen, the author of this article.**

BY PEGGY WAHLEN

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grammar, syntax, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Sometimes the Scripture even suggests discussion topics or writing assignments.

### **Combining Spiritual and Academic Benefits**

My first priority in choosing Scripture for my class to study is that the words contain meaningful spiritual thoughts of comfort, guidance, and assurance of God's love. The beauty and symmetry of language is also a powerful consideration. I look for interesting linguistic points that support my lesson plans. For example, if I am teaching prepositions, I select a passage that contains several interesting prepositional phrases. As the semester progresses and the assignments become more challenging, I choose passages with more complex structures. God's Word is full of both spiritual blessings and academic possibilities. My goal is to let God speak through His Word. A student once told me, "I can't wait to see what Scripture we will learn because it always meets a specific need in my life at just that moment."

In choosing passages to assign, I always consider the variety of cultures in my classes. At Union College, we have quite a remarkable mix considering our location in the heartland of America. We have students from Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Brazil, Peru, Mexico, Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, America Samoa, and various countries in Africa. We have Muslims, Buddhists, Catholics, Adventists, evangelical Christians, and even some agnostics. I have learned to choose Scriptures very carefully so as not to offend. References to "Jesus" or "Savior" would be problematic to some, so I choose passages that refer to "the Lord" or "God." The reference to God as "Father" has also raised some questions because of the implied relationship to the "Son." In addition, since I am interested in teaching practical English to my ESL students, I use modern translations or a paraphrase such as *The Clear Word Bible*.<sup>2</sup>

### **Sample Lesson Plan**

Here is a sample weekly plan. (The students learn one passage of Scripture each week.)

**Monday:** The students copy the Scripture from the board. We discuss any unfamiliar words, making sure each person understands the meaning of the text. The students are encouraged to rewrite the Scripture in their own words.

**Tuesday:** I ask one or two students to read the Scripture aloud, and we begin to work on pronunciation and phrasing.

**Wednesday:** We read the text again. I may read it aloud, leaving out words to see if they can fill in the blanks. We begin



**For ESL students in Peggy Wahlen's Advanced Reading class, Friday is "stand and deliver" day, when students can earn extra credit for reading a Scripture passage aloud to the class. Above, a Japanese student laughs at his first attempt at pronunciation and phrasing, and is happy to have the chance to try again.**

to notice grammatical structures that are typically problematic to ESL students.

**Thursday:** We read the text aloud in unison, noting the dramatic pauses, and words with special emphasis. We discuss structural features of the language.

**Friday:** The students are given the opportunity to perform the Scripture orally, from memory, for extra credit. If they want even more extra credit, they may stand in front of the class and speak with dramatic inflections and gestures. The students take this opportunity seriously, and while there is laughter and enjoyment as their classmates perform, the tone of the class is respectful. The last step of the weekly cycle is complete when the students write the text from memory as part of a quiz. In order to receive full credit, the spelling, punctuation, and capitalization must be perfect.

### **Matching Texts and Learning Activities**

The following are a few of the scriptural passages and language activities that I have used in my ESL classes over the years.

**Scripture:** "O Lord, search my heart for me; test me so I can know my thoughts as you know them. Let me know if there is any wicked way in me, and then help me walk the way I should" (Psalm 139:23, 24).

**Vocabulary:** Depending on the level of the class, students may need vocabulary help with some of the words: *search, test, thoughts, wicked*. One effective way to teach vocabulary is to have students who know, or think they know, the meaning, act out the word for the rest of the class.

**Imperative Verbs:** One of the first structures beginning students learn is the imperative verb, with its command or request structure: stand up, sit down, open your book, hand in your papers, etc. "Search my heart," "test me," "let me know," and "help me" are all examples of this structure. After I point these out, students can create their own imperative commands or requests. The polite request, which includes "please," is a

nice addition to this structure. The game “Simon Says” is an active and fun way to practice imperative verbs.

**Modals:** Modals are auxiliary verbs that add different meanings to the main verb: *Can, should, must, might*, etc. I can work—ability; I should work—advisability; I must work—necessity; I might work—possibility. In the text from Psalm 139, we see some modals: “so I *can know* [so I am able to know] my thoughts as you know them” and “help me walk the way I *should*” (in the way that is advisable). ESL students must learn not only the form of modals (modal + base form of the verb) but also the various meanings of modals. Some modals are quite challenging, carrying multiple meanings. Notice the following multiple meanings of *could*. When I was young, I *could* run fast (past ability). It *could* rain (future possibility). *Could* you help me? (request for help). The Scripture about God searching our hearts, which uses the modals *can* and *should*, is a simple way to introduce the study of modals or to review modals for more advanced students.

**Scripture:** “Don’t be awed by the rich and famous, no matter how rich or famous they are. They can’t take their wealth with them when they die. How can they use their riches when they’re lying in the grave?” (Psalm 49:16, 17).

**Parts of Speech:** For a simple grammatical activity, have the students count the number of nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc., in the text. The words *rich* or *riches* in the text in Psalm 49:16 and 17 provide an interesting example for the students to consider. “The **rich**” includes a noun that designates a group of people.

The article *the* is a big clue indicating that the word it modifies is a noun. Later in the Scripture, we find the words, “no matter how **rich** or famous they are.” Here, the word *rich* is an adjective, describing the people. Turned around it reads, “They are rich or famous.” Finally, “How can they use their **riches** . . .?” This is another noun, referring to money or wealth. The possessive adjective *their* before *riches* is another clue that a noun follows. Have the students try telling the number of nouns or verbs in a passage. They will enjoy searching, and then sharing what they have found.

**Questions:** ESL students must be taught the correct formula for asking questions. First, they should learn the two main categories of questions: yes/no questions (Are you happy? Did you work today?) and information questions (Where do you live? When did you arrive here? Why are you studying English?)

The question in Psalm 49:16 and 17 is an information question: “How can they use their riches . . . ?” The formula is not complicated: question word (how) + auxiliary word (*can*) + subject (*they*) + main verb (*use*).

Once students understand this simple formula, they can practice asking each other interesting questions. Students particularly enjoy this process near the beginning of a semester or quarter when they don’t know their classmates well. It’s a practical and fun way to get acquainted. For more advanced students, it’s useful to point out that the word *when* in the text (“when they die” and “when they’re lying in the grave”) is not a question word but rather a subordinating conjunction that introduces adverb time clauses. They will also notice that the order of the subject and verb in clauses is normal, not inverted as in questions.

**Homophones:** ESL students are interested in some of the little quirks of the English language, such as “*their riches*” and “*they’re lying in the grave.*” When the third homophone, *there*, is added to the group, it becomes a challenge to distinguish among them.

**Irregular Verbs:** I teach irregular verbs in a systematic way, about 10 or 15 each week. I point out the four main forms of the verbs such as *eat/ate/eaten/eating* and *take/took/taken/taking*, and have the students learn the four verb forms for each irregular verb as well as the correct ways to make statements and ask question in the main tenses. Two of the most problematic of the irregular verbs are *lie* and *lay*. This is true not only for ESL students but also for native English



A Union College ESL student from Vietnam practices writing the assigned Scripture in preparation for the end-of-week quiz.

*For a simple grammatical activity, have the students count the number of nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc., in the text.*

speakers. The part of the Scripture, “when they’re *lying* in the grave,” presents the opportunity to contrast *lie* and *lay*. *Lie* refers to the position of the body: *li/lay/lain/lying*. On the other hand, *lay* refers to the putting or placing of an object: *lay/laid/laid/laying*. Acting out the verbs immediately clears things up.

**Speaking/Reading/Writing Projects:**

The passage from Psalm 49:16 and 17 can also be used to encourage students to consider their values and life goals. It seems that no matter where students come from in the world, they have been influenced to some degree by “the rich and famous”: movie stars, sports figures, musicians, and political leaders. My ESL students have enjoyed exploring the following sequence of language activities:

1. Participating in a lively discussion about who they admire (who “awes” them) and why;

*I am convinced that the use of Scripture in the classroom has enriched my students' language learning experience.*

2. Interviewing others about their cultural traditions relating to death and dying;

3. Reading articles and stories about wealthy people and analyzing how they have used their riches (Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey, etc.);

4. Writing a short essay about "Someone I Admire" or "If I Were a Millionaire"; and

5. Writing their own obituary.

**Scripture:** "The Lord is the One who made the heavens and the earth. He did so by His own power. He created it out of nothing. He formed it by His wisdom and stretched out the heavens according to His understanding" (Jeremiah 10:12).

**Pronunciation:** Students speaking certain languages will experience greater pronunciation challenges when learning English. Taking into consideration the first languages of students, teachers can tailor the pronunciation practice accordingly. However, one particular pronunciation issue seems to challenge almost all international students: the *-ed* ending for the past tense. The Scripture from Jeremiah contains three words with the *-ed* ending, each one illustrating one of the three pronunciation rules:

1. **CREATED:** When a verb ends with the *t* or *d* sound, the suffix *-d* or *-ed* adds an extra syllable. Take *create* for example. This word has two syllables. When the *-ed* is added, forming the word *created*, it creates a third syllable. Other examples are *handed*, *fasted*, and *bonded*.

2. **FORMED:** When a verb ends in a voiced sound, the added *-ed* suffix sounds like *d* with no added syllable. Take the word *form*, for example. The *m* sound is voiced; therefore, when the *-ed* is added, the word *formed* still has only one syllable, with the strong *d* sound completing the word. The great temptation for ESL

students is to add a second syllable and pronounce the word "form-ed." Other examples are *hugged*, *handed*, *prayed*, and *grabbed*.

3. **STRETCHED:** When a verb ends in an unvoiced sound, the added *-ed* suffix sounds like *t* with no addition of an extra syllable. Take the word *stretch*, for example. The *ch* sound is unvoiced, with no vocal chord action. Therefore, when the *-ed* is added, the resulting word, *stretched*, is still one syllable, with the soft *t* sound completing the word. Again, the temptation



The author's Advanced Reading students work on a Scripture assignment. The young woman in the foreground had been a language teacher in Brazil.



Students from many nations forge loving and supportive bonds as they study ESL at Union College.

for language learners is to pronounce the word “stretched-ed.” Other examples: *kissed, popped, talked, and laughed.*

### Conclusion

I am convinced that the use of Scripture in the classroom has enriched my students’ language learning experience. Sometimes a quick lesson in grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation is all that is needed to clear up a problem area, so why not use examples and passages from the greatest Book ever written? But more importantly, the students have the opportunity to think and talk about God as a Being who not only cares about them intimately but also sits in majesty over the universe as the Creator and Sustainer of us all.

Over the years, my students have commented about what learning Scriptures means to them. One student’s response particularly touched my heart. She wrote an essay entitled “The Worst Day of My Life,” describing how she had received a negative medical report and had to return for further testing. Alone and far from home, she waited anxiously for the test results. She wrote that dread and fear filled her mind. But then she had been assigned this text to memorize in class: “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should collapse and the mountains slide into the sea” (Psalm 46:1, 2). This text, she said, had comforted and sustained her. Above grammar and pronunciation, above spelling and vocabulary, the student had learned the greatest lesson of all: God’s Word can enlighten not only our intellectual and academic lives, but our spirits and hearts as well. ✍



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has worked in Christian education and pastoral ministry with her husband for almost 30 years, and says that it is “the deepest desire of my heart to share the gospel message of peace with my students.”

### Resources

The following sources are helpful reference works for teaching ESL:

Ron Cowan, *The Teacher’s Grammar of English* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Richard Firsten, *The ELT Grammar Book* (Alta Book Center Publishers, 2002).

### REFERENCES

1. Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publ. Assn., 1923), p. 516.
2. Jack J. Blanco, *The Clear Word* (Hagerstown, Md.:

Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1994). All scriptural references in this article are taken from the *Clear Word*.

## Guest Editorial

*Continued from page 3*

sources highlighted in the issue as well, many of which can be accessed online. Following the Master Teacher’s example, Adventist educators need to assume the responsibility of continually adapting their instructional methods and materials to meet the needs of all learners, including the culturally and linguistically diverse. Let us prepare ourselves to meet this challenge and to reap the rewards! ✍

*The Coordinator for this special issue on Teaching English as a Second Language, Carol Campbell, Ph.D., is a Professor of Education at Southwestern Adventist University in Keene, Texas. Her areas of emphasis are reading, language arts, children’s literature, and early childhood education. The JOURNAL staff express their gratitude for her advice and assistance in the planning and production of the issue.*

### REFERENCES

1. Not her real name.
2. Suzanne F. Perego and Owen F. Boyle, *Reading, Writing, and Learning in ESL: A Resource Book for K-12 Teachers, Fourth Edition* (Boston, Mass.: Pearson, 2008), p. 3.
3. Ibid, pp. 2, 3.

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