

# Classroom Devotions in the Foreign Language Course: Possibilities for Effecting Change in Student Motivation and Attitude

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## *Abstract*

*This article reports on one language department's exploratory study of students' motivations for and attitudes towards foreign language learning, with particular focus on students' conceptions of a Christian view of foreign language learning. It then details the application of a devotional series, designed to inform students' understanding of Scriptural foundations for foreign language learning, that was integrated into the language course curriculum. Finally, it presents the project's measured results along with a discussion of both the benefits and pitfalls of tackling Scriptural passages in the foreign language class.*

## **Introduction**

A fundamental task facing instructors working towards their pedagogical goals is, at some point, to determine the extent of students' prior knowledge of the subject matter. Some instructors garner this information informally through, say, class discussion. Others administer tools designed to measure the knowledge and experience that students bring to the course. Foreign language instructors often enjoy vivid clarity in this regard when teaching complete novices, for they know they must begin at the very beginning. For other language levels, instructors implement the placement exam, the oral interview, or some other trusty tool.

Faith-based schools often embrace goals that broaden the bound-

aries of learning and formation to include issues such as moral and spiritual development. Mission statements of faith-based schools often declare as much, putting religious goals front and center in the school's pedagogy. The mission statement of the college where the present study originated, for example, asserts that "We offer education that is shaped by Christian faith, thought, and practice"<sup>1</sup> Given the centrality of such a Christian commitment in a college's curriculum, one ought to expect that at least one goal of a foreign language class will be to develop a student's understanding how one's Christian faith comes to bear on the enterprise of learning that language. With respect to goals in Christian formation, one would expect that the responsible instructor will set about, in some way, to determine the students' attitudes and understandings about learning foreign languages upon arrival in the classroom. The puzzling reality here, however, is how seldom that is actually done in any intentional or systematic way.

The intention of this paper is to present the initial results of one college department's effort (that of the Department of Germanic and Asian Languages at Calvin College) to address the issue of students' attitudes and assumptions regarding a Christian view of foreign language learning by 1) gathering data to measure preconceptions, 2) systematically tackling the issue in the curriculum, and 3) measuring, at least provisionally, the results of the project. The data in phase one was acquired via questionnaires at the semester's onset. The curricular device we used to address students' understanding was a series of classroom devotions featuring Scriptural texts that trace themes relevant to the enterprise of foreign language learning.<sup>2</sup> We measured the results by means of exit interviews at the semester's end.

## **Background and Rationale of Project**

Certain explanations of the project's inception and some qualifications of its scope and limitations will be useful at this point.

The adoption of a new college core curriculum prompted a ripple effect of departmental reflection on the integration of faith and teaching at our institution. A major goal of this college-wide curriculum is to teach and model Christian virtues in all core-level courses. One result of the new curricular structure was the generation of departmental statements that clarify both the specific manner of faith/learning integration and the approach to teaching virtues in the core-level courses (which include the first four semesters of any given foreign language). The Biblical ideas and convictions that animate our departmental stance are reflected in statements such as:

“The ... department sees foreign language learning in terms of the overarching Christian virtue of hospitality, in particular hospitality to the stranger. The good host has an open home, is attentive and caring towards the guest, interested in his or her stories and willing to draw fresh insight from them. Similarly, to learn another language is to open up part of oneself to other words, other stories, another culture, and other people made in God’s image. Even at the beginner level, giving oneself to the learning of a new language involves a willingness to humble oneself to relinquish the sovereign competence of the mother tongue and receive alien sounds, patterns and ideas into our experience of communicating with others and speaking about our world. We hope that students will learn to be receptive and loving hosts to the new language and culture and thereby in turn to become more sensitive guests when they travel or work overseas.”<sup>3</sup>

The document goes on to recognize the challenges involved in cultivating Christian virtue in the Foreign Language class:

“We do not wish to claim that growth in the virtues mentioned above follows automatically from the mere experience of being taught another language. Clearly some pedagogical approaches will foster particular virtues more successfully than others. The ongoing challenge is to discover how foreign language pedagogy can be most fruitfully developed in this respect.” (ibid).

The task, therefore, has been one of finding the pedagogical tools to ensure that Christian teaching is taking place. Furthermore we felt a particular responsibility not only to devise explicit tools for presenting Scriptural foundations for foreign language learning to students, but also to ensure that students would learn to recognize and, ideally, be able to articulate such a vision. This burden was clearly before us because of sobering findings in an assessment project done on campus in 1997. In that survey a group of sophomores had been asked whether their education displayed any particular faith perspective. The answers to that question revealed that only fifteen

percent claimed to be certain of a faith perspective in their education, but even of that group “none [was] able to give a complete or thorough account of the Reformed [Christian] perspective of [the college].”<sup>4</sup> While the document that relates that assessment project goes on to explain numerous structural flaws in the former curriculum program that likely account for the dismal results, the implication remains evident that students not only deserve more effective Christian teaching, but they must also be helped to develop to a level at which they themselves can articulate a Christian view on the subject matter they learn.

Many academic faith-based institutions naturally ask students to evaluate their instructors’ effectiveness in integrating faith and teaching. Such is usually done by means of a question or two as part of the course-concluding evaluation form. Teaching faculty—those at our institution at least—have informally observed that an increase of time spent in devotions typically leads students to award the instructor higher marks in this faith-integration category. Such a direct correlation would suggest that the time spent in devotions is perhaps the chief operative variable relating to how students perceive the integration of faith and teaching.<sup>5</sup> This observation, and its implication, provide a certain dilemma at an institution such as Calvin College which is steeped in the Reformed Christian tradition. This dilemma is brought to mind in the opening paragraphs of the college’s core curriculum document, *An Engagement with God’s World*, where one reads: “In the Reformed tradition, Christian education is not just education as usual with Bible classes tacked on; it is an education that is permeated throughout by a Christian view of the world”.<sup>6</sup> Such a broad scope to the faith and teaching integration project has historically prompted pockets of the college’s faculty to curtail or dispense with devotions in class to emphasize that that which makes the teaching and learning Christian is not expressly the opening devotional moments. Rather the “Christianity” of the course is to be found in the very detail and substance of the course’s content. While respecting and affirming this broader vision of Christian teaching, our department reached the conviction that it remains eminently legitimate and even fitting for the Christian college to indeed include devotions as a regular exercise in piety and community.<sup>7</sup> But we also wished to integrate such devotions more closely with our wider pedagogical goals.

The project that has emerged, therefore, aims to respect the sometimes ambivalent signals about faith / learning integration inherent in practice of classroom devotions. At the same time it honors the timeworn prac-

tice of classroom devotions and sees there an opportunity to incorporate Scriptural course content. In this sense, our experiment introduces not so much something new, but rather it takes an existing practice in many quarters of Christian education and tries to integrate it more closely with our goals as foreign language educators and with those of the new core curriculum. The aim is that the devotional moments in selected class periods should not be stealing time from the curriculum, as common fears would have it, but rather should be contributing to the overall pedagogical goals—redeeming the time, if you will.

Certain limitations of this study ought to be acknowledged here at the outset. It is an exploratory study with a limited data sample and not empirically rigorous; it is a provisional report of informal efforts within a department to gather data on their own pedagogical interventions. As such, it points to an area where more rigorous research might yield data of use not only to foreign language practitioners at institutions with similar goals in Christian education, but also to those interested in general data on motivational issues and preconceptions regarding the North American foreign language student. Our experiment is also restricted to a single area of Christian formation in the classroom, namely the practice of devotions. Other facets of the course and certainly other intentional curricular (or extracurricular) activities could impact the students in these areas, but such lie beyond the present scope.

## **Research Method and Project Description**

The central task of our pedagogical experiment has been to take students on an exploratory journey through selections of Scripture that address themes relevant to our educational aims in Christian formation. A two-fold intent entails having the students explore Scripture while wearing the hat of the language learner, while at the same time engaging them in “the central intellectual project of Calvin College, the development of a Christian worldview and a broad, faith-based engagement with the ambient culture.”<sup>8</sup>

As a prelude to the devotions project we administered an entrance survey during the first week of the Fall 2000 semester to 74 students in three beginner level courses (one Dutch and two German courses), and one intermediate level German conversation course. Students were allowed to complete the survey on their own time. The survey consists of the following four questions calling for written response: 1) Why learn another language?

2) How do you feel about learning to speak another language? 3) Do you think that Christian faith has anything to do with learning a foreign language? 4) Are there Christian reasons for learning a foreign language? The questions and their responses are listed below, with the frequency of answers listed parenthetically.

**1) Why learn another language?**

- To (better) understand another culture (34)
- Broadens horizons / expands mind, education (26)
- Communicate better (15)
- Career opportunities (14)
- Tool for travel abroad (12)
- Appreciate better your own language (9)
- Understand heritage (8)
- Languages are fun / interesting (8)
- Changes your view of the world (6)
- To read (literature) in another language / need it for studies (5)
- It's required of me (4)
- Empathy (for others learning English) (2)
- Gives one a challenge (2)
- Helps understand history of country (1)
- Christian stewardship (1)
- Takes one out of comfort zone (1)
- "It's an ambiguous question" (1)
- Understand better yourself and own culture (1)
- Experience diversity (1)
- Good for missions (1)

**2) How do you feel about learning to speak another language?**

- It's Frustrating / It's a challenge / difficult (27)
- I Love it / Positive experience / It's enjoyable / fun (26)
- I'm looking forward to it / excited about it (24)
- It's satisfying / rewarding / worth it / it's important (16)
- I'm nervous / scared / intimidated (12)
- I'm overwhelmed (3)
- Sad and guilty that I waited this long to learn a second language (1)
- Intrigued (1)

**3) Do you think that Christian faith has anything to do with learning a foreign language?**

Yes

Missions / spreading God's Word (35)

Enjoying creation and its beauty / diversity / learning about people different from myself (11)

Faith builds understanding of others / Shows respect for others (11)

We should love all people / Serve and care for others (8)

Fellowship / communication with one another (7)

Rely on God to learn (4)

God created languages (3)

All nations one in Christ (1)

To see how God is working in other countries (2)

Brings us closer to perfecting God's creation (1)

Faith and language both take hard work and dedication (1)

Languages have somehow always divided Christians (1)

All things work toward my salvation (2)

If we learn the Lord's Prayer in German (1)

I suppose it does, but don't know how (1)

Motivation to learn (1)

No

Learn for personal reasons/has nothing to do with faith / faith is not really important / faith is irrelevant / it's beside the point (10)

Only if you learn the original languages of the Bible (2)

**4) Are there Christian reasons for learning a foreign language?**

Yes

Missions/great commission/evangelism (58)

To love all people / help people / remove barriers between people / to understand one another better (18)

To deepen the communion of the Saints (5)

To know more about God's world (4)

To praise God in another language (1)

Our faith influences everything we do (1)

To read Luther's Bible/other Christian works (2)

To work against ethnocentricity / antidote to American self-centeredness (3)

To be better educated (1)

Bible had to be translated in first place (1)

No

There are NO Christian reasons / (3)

Christians don't need to learn a language to be saved (1)

Many students listed multiple reasons in response to the questions, thus the irregular number of total responses listed. The entrance survey yielded several noteworthy results. The question (no. 1), “why learn another language” received a wide array of responses with several predominant answers, namely: understanding another culture; career opportunities; broadening horizons; because languages are fun. Question no. 2, which probes their feelings about learning a language, yielded some clear contrasts, with roughly equal numbers of students expressing positive and negative feelings. Questions three and four, which deal specifically with Christian motivations, showed decidedly higher uniformity of opinion, with a few dominant answers. Several students commented on the survey that questions three and four overlapped in their mind, or that the distinction between them was not clear. In retrospect, this ambiguity is apparent, so we should perhaps observe the data for both together. Indeed, the pattern of the answers is similar, with missions—or the Great Commission—clearly being the predominant Christian reason given for learning a foreign language. The “missions reason” is given to the third question more than twice as often as the second-place answer. Similarly, the ratio between the top answer to question four (Missions / great commission / evangelism) and the response to the second answer (to love all people / help people / remove barriers between people / to understand one another better) is three to one.

One conspicuous contrast is that between students' own reasons for learning the foreign language and their articulation of a Christian rationale (i.e. between responses in questions one and three/four). Whereas the overwhelming majority of respondents listed missions as a Christian motivation for learning languages, only one student listed missions when initially asked for their reason. For such a gaping disparity several explanations seem possible. A variable contributing to the gap might be connected to the foreign languages in question, German and Dutch. A study that considered, say, Asian languages or Spanish might yield differing results. The gap may also suggest that only the tiniest minority of students at this institution—or at least in these language classes—are interested in missions. Given that the institution is a liberal arts college—and not, say, a Bible college specializing in missions training—it is likely true that the number



of missions-bound students is quite small. However, the great frequency of “missions” responses to questions three and four suggests that Christian students readily apply the rhetoric of missions when asked to reflect on Christian motivations for an academic activity. This disparity between the ready Christian rhetoric and the actual experience or motivations of the vast majority of our students seems to invite further attention.

The data also revealed that students had room to grow in their understanding of a connection between faith and foreign language learning. For example, some eleven students stated unequivocally that Christian faith has nothing to do with learning a foreign language. Several written comments by students suggested puzzling rationales—or perhaps fuzzy thinking. One comment was “Yes—the only way non-English or other languages can learn about Jesus is through translation—meaning someone would have to learn a foreign language.” With due respect to the sincerity of the comment, it seems that some students may need reminding that English is not the source language of the Scriptures. Another person commented: “I think it does just a little, because by our faith in God we rely on him to help us learn the language and about their cultures.” While it is certainly a tenable truth that God aids us in accomplishing our work, a Christian reason for learning must surely entail more than a little divine aid to better a course grade.

## Scriptural texts

Fourteen Scriptural texts are used in this series. The number fourteen has no particular significance other than it allows one unit per week per semester. The texts themselves and their progression roughly follow the line of argumentation used in the recent book, *The Gift of the Stranger: Faith, Hospitality, and Foreign Language Learning*.<sup>9</sup> A list and condensed summary of the passages is given here with comment. Parenthetical reference to relevant discussion in *The Gift of the Stranger* (GoS) follows each Scripture reference.

**Genesis 2:19-20** (GoS 5-6) A creative naming process is entrusted to Adam—enormous linguistic responsibility and creativity are involved here. Language is divinely created but not tightly determined. Affirmation of diversity (creativity plus spreading).

**Genesis 9:1, 10:5, 10:18, 10:32** (GoS 7) Spreading out into and

over the earth as an act of obedience. Each people with its own language. Diversity accepted as normal.

**Genesis 11: 1-9** (GoS 209-211; 7-8) Babel. After the flood, Noah's sons were commanded to spread out over the whole earth (with their different languages). And now we see the resistance to this command, and all are speaking one language. Linguistic uniformity should not be read as a golden age. The story also emphasizes the dangers of a fortress-like monolithic community; at the end, God returns the people to their appointed task—to spread out.

**Deuteronomy 6:4** (GoS 9-10) Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. The focus here is on the command to hear, to listen—not, in the first place, to speak. This passage is well contrasted with Psalm 12 where God rebukes his people for constantly talking and listening to themselves.

**Exodus 22:21, Leviticus 19:18, Leviticus 19:34** (GoS 10-12) Various 'love the alien' texts. Israelites are to remember their experience of being foreigners. 'Love your neighbor as yourself' appears here. (Christ drew on this passage). How do you love your neighbor? Start by treating the *aliens* among you as your own, Leviticus suggests.

**Psalm 12: 1-4** (GoS 9) Right use and misuse of language. Language used for service or for oppression and domination. Arrogant speaking versus an ear open to God and others.

**Luke 10: 25-37** (GoS 13) Parable of Good Samaritan. The stranger as neighbor. The twist in the parable is noteworthy because where one might expect the dénouement to reveal that the Jewish victim was the neighbor, Jesus goes a step further to show that the Samaritan models what a neighbor ought to be.

**Matthew 25: 31-46** (GoS 13) Parable of Sheep and Goats. Also says: "For I was a stranger and you invited me in." Loving the stranger as a sign of grace and a criterion of judgment.

**Mark 16: 15** (GoS) The great commission.

**Acts 2:5-8** (GoS) Pentecost: Galileans speaking and preaching in everyone else's language. God's affirmation of diversity.

**1 Corinthians 14:6-12** (GoS) Humility, oneself as a stranger. “Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me.”

**Zephaniah 3:9-10** (GoS) Vision of restored unity: “Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him shoulder to shoulder.”

**Revelation 7:9, 11:9** (GoS 7) Good and evil are shared in all cultures. People from “every nation, tribe, people and language” are included both among the redeemed and among the enemies of God. God’s favor does not follow national/cultural/linguistic boundaries.

The passages in Genesis show God’s entrusting of the creative naming process to Adam. We then read of the mandate to “spread out” into the earth and God’s creational affirmation of linguistic and cultural diversity. The Babel story is rich enough to elicit extensive discussion, but a core idea to note is the people’s disobedience for consolidating into monolithic power rather than spreading out and filling the earth.<sup>10</sup> It is important that students come to see the shortcomings of the common traditional reading of the story that imagines monolingualism to be a divinely-willed natural state.

The Deuteronomy passage speaks powerfully about the role of listening. God’s people are a listening people, and, chiefly, they are to listen to God. Psalm 12 reminds us, in sharp contrast to the Deuteronomy passage, that a common form of sin is seen in peoples’ proclivity to talk without listening, and even to dominate with their words. Godly use of language understands virtue in listening (particularly to the alien) as well as humility and restraint in speaking.

The Exodus and Leviticus passages resonate forcefully with the themes of foreigners and aliens—pervasive themes of the very exodus narrative. Here we see the Lord remind his people of their very identity as ones who have been aliens in foreign lands. God calls for radically generous and hospitable treatment for those aliens who find themselves among the Hebrew people. These passages about the stranger serve also as the source for Christ’s words on “loving your neighbor.”

The New Testament passages are, perhaps, somewhat more famil-

iar. The Good Samaritan story can be read with the question in mind as to who our neighbor is. An answer to the question is found there once again in terms of the alien.<sup>11</sup> In the Parable of the Sheep and Goats, Christ also explicitly mentions the act of inviting in a stranger. The Great Commission in Mark and the story of Pentecost in Acts are also essential texts for this topic. In Corinthians we see Paul speaking of the importance of understanding what a foreigner is saying and identifying himself first as a foreigner if he does not understand. Finally, we see prophetic visions (in Zephaniah and Revelation) of the great multi-national and multi-lingual choruses that Christ is drawing to himself and which will assemble before him in the fulfillment of time.

## **Method of Presentation**

The method of presentation varied with individual instructors, so there is no cut and dried formula to detail here. However, participating teachers used certain techniques and strategies fairly regularly. The text was made available to the students in advance, either as hard copy or by way of the intranet server Blackboard. Students received the text in a two-column, bilingual format. We dealt with one text per week, usually early in the week. Students were always aware of this devotional portion of the class in advance and were asked to study the texts ahead of time.

Discussion of the Scripture passages usually lasted between five and fifteen minutes, during which time the texts remained projected on the classroom screen for easy communal viewing and reference. Once the passage had been read aloud we spent time in linguistic exercises such as identification of cognates and translations where necessary. Power Point cloze exercises also proved fruitful, and enabled us to selectively highlight, for example, the part of speech being learned at the time. Scrambled text exercises also worked with the more narrative passages like the Good Samaritan story. Discussion of the content in the passages often took place in both the target language and English—with more English in the elementary levels.

## **Results of the Exit Survey**

Forty three students completed an exit survey at the end of the Fall 2000 semester. This number—being fewer than in the entrance survey—reflects that the intermediate level course was not polled and also that some

students chose not to answer all the questions. Nevertheless, the exit data from the remaining classes provide a sufficiently large base for initial comparative analysis.

The exit survey called for quantitative as well as qualitative feedback. The questions yielding quantitative feedback are repeated here along with the response data:

- 1) **I have a greater understanding of how the Bible is relevant to foreign language learning.**
  - 42% strongly agree
  - 22% agree
  - 7% no opinion
- 2) **I have a greater understanding of how the Bible views cultural difference.**
  - 44.2 % strongly agree
  - 44.2 % agree
  - 9.3% no opinion
  - 2.3 % disagree
- 3) **The devotional texts have led me to fresh insights into familiar passages of Scripture**
  - 72% strongly agree
  - 26 % agree
  - 2 % no opinion
- 4) **I found the devotional texts interesting**
  - 51 % strongly agree
  - 40 % agree
  - 9 % no opinion
- 5) **I found the devotional texts edifying (they built me up in my faith)**
  - 28 % strongly agree
  - 44% agree
  - 28 % no opinion

The questions yielding qualitative feedback are given below along with summaries of the students' written responses. The numbers in parenthesis indicate the frequency of the given comment or one similar to it:

**1) Has your personal attitude to learning another language changed since you began this course? If so, how?**

Yes

Language learning is more positive experience now / the more I progress the more enjoyable (11)

Language learning isn't just about memorization and grammar / more than just the way people talk / Language learning is something beyond filling a requirement or for fun—a calling / it's Biblically rooted / it's a way of showing respect / I don't just learn it for myself, but also for others / learning language is a way to love your neighbor (9)

I'm beginning to appreciate cultural differences / to see how you can learn culture through a language (2)

German is now definitely a major or minor of mine (2)

I enjoy getting in touch with my roots (1)

Broadened my horizons (1)

It's hardly worth learning/too much time needed to study (1)

No

No / Not really / No. It's still hard (7)

Hasn't changed; I've always been excited to / always felt it is important (6)

No, But I'm having more fun now (1)

No, but I see now more reasons for learning a foreign language (1)

## 2) Are there Christian reasons for learning another language?

Yes

Call for us to love our neighbors / way to be a good neighbor / to show respect and acceptance towards others / way to welcome foreigners into your life (unselfishly) / way to show hospitality (16)

Missions (11)

Ability to speak to our Christian brethren and with others is important (6)

Helps understand God's creation / our calling as caretakers and peacemakers (4)

To bring people together / to learn from everyone else to help others better (4)

Opens my eyes to new stories and ideas (2)

Beauty of the language God created (1)

Scripture speaks strongly against ethnocentrism (1)

No

I wouldn't say there are "Christian" reasons, but it's important to be educated culturally (1)

**3) Is there any overriding message you've discerned from the devotional texts with which you have been presented?**

Yes

Caring for aliens, who are our neighbors / welcome the stranger / call to be neighbors / hospitality includes language learning / hospitality is a spiritual gift / who is my neighbor? / we're all strangers and neighbors to somebody in this world / love your neighbor (15)

Awareness of the interaction of different races/cultures in the Bible (4)

Language diversity is a good thing / how we should live as Christians in a diverse world (4)

Observing the words used in Bible translation caused me to think critically (3)

The value of learning a language from the perspective of the Old Testament (2)

Look at familiar Bible passages with new eyes (2)

The Bible says different things—can be interpreted differently in different languages (1)

Language learning benefits us as Christians and it's our obligation (1)

God is sovereign (1)

"Gosh, I can't think of [only] one thing" (1)

We're all created equally (1)

Language is not meant to be a barrier (1)

No

No (2)

But I've enjoyed them (1)

A reading of the exit survey's results prompts the following analyses. Question one seeks a general response regarding the students' attitude toward the language. While the positive attitude that predominates does not necessarily reflect upon the Scripture study, the nature of the comments suggests that they are finding more meaning in the enterprise of their foreign language learning and that this may, in at least some cases, be connected with the themes explored in the devotions. A recurring comment is that learning a language is about so much more than they had previously thought: it is a way to show respect, and it is rooted in a certain view about other people. Note that some of those who say that their attitude has not been changed indicate that it is because their attitude was positive in the first place.

Question two asks essentially the same as did questions three and

four in the entrance survey: Are there Christian reasons for learning the foreign language? The proportions in the answers to question two contrast starkly with the entrance survey. Students now articulate a wide variety of attitudinal reasons for learning another language. The frequency with which a missions calling is given as an answer has decreased, putting it into second place. Regarding a perceived overriding message in our text discussions (question three), students responded with an array of answers clustering around notions of hospitality, one's neighbor, and awareness and appreciation of diversity.

The quantitative data suggest a high success rate with respect to the five questions asked. An overwhelming majority responded with either strong agreement or agreement to each question. The percentage of no opinions is below one in ten for each question except for number five (regarding their edification). In fact, only question two solicited any disagreement – a mere 2.3%.

## Summary Comments

These summary comments are both analytical of the data and impressionistic regarding the experience. I offer my comments in the first person, but they are representative of our common experience and analysis. At the risk of using cliché, this Scripture text project was a learning experience for both instructor and student. As an instructor, I found it rewarding to reflect on these Scriptural selections in a systematic fashion and to share insights with students. I found it inspirational to ponder, in a spirit of community, the implications of Scriptural treatments of language, diversity, and culture. The breadth of students' motivations for learning languages was striking, and it increased my sensitivity for their perceptions of the endeavor of language learning.

Amongst the students a sense of novelty, of curiosity, and of being intrigued prevailed—with some notable exceptions granted. Students were generally reserved and reticent during discussions—a posture for which several explanations are plausible. Students are not accustomed to exercises in Scriptural exegesis during the foreign language class. Furthermore, for some students the deviation from the regular classroom patterns was notably awkward. Others were likely silent because the ideas were novel to them. Still others displayed at times a look of impatience as they indulged their professor's ruminations on the Scripture passages.<sup>12</sup>

All in all, the student feedback is encouraging. The quantitative



result data from questions 1, 2, and 3 offer convincing evidence that their journey through the passages increased their understanding of the Bible's relevance to foreign language and cultural issues. The 72% strong agreement substantiates the hunch that for many students, the themes and ideas discussed were new to them and therefore that explicit pedagogical treatment was needed.

While the survey results of this project are most encouraging, this author feels it is important to acknowledge some of the difficulties and pitfalls of such a walk through Scripture with students in the foreign language class. For example, the instructor is liable to find himself in a methodological no-man's land when treating a Scripture passage. On the one hand, the instructor wants the students to hear the text in the foreign language, or to read it aloud. One wants them to focus on the language and on the vocabulary since working with these texts presents such rich opportunity for passive vocabulary advancement. On the other hand, the instructor is eager to get into substantive discussion. I resolved this tension by speaking mainly in English, especially in my elementary class. But departing from the target language may not be an acceptable strategy for some teachers. Since the opportunities for vocabulary recognition and comprehension exercises are so rich when dealing with a familiar text in the target language, one needs to decide in advance the limits to one's focus on strictly language comprehension, as opposed to comprehension of the ideas. Having identified these tensions, however, our group now feels positioned to make informed choices for the next round in presenting the material.<sup>13</sup>

Regarding now the content of the passages, I found myself, at times, vacillating between excitement and frustration while working through these texts with the students. The excitement came from my own enthusiasm about the subject matter and my ongoing discovery of how foreign language education can be used to further God's Kingdom and his shalom. The frustration came wrapped in a number of related feelings and discomforts. At times I was almost startled as I listened to myself speak and found that I was engaging in Old Testament exegesis and lecturing on Biblical interpretation. That can suddenly be scary territory when intelligent students start putting hard questions to you and you realize that you yourself are little more than an amateur theologian. Such was the case when we got involved in the various interpretations of the Babel story.

Other times a certain awkwardness was palpable in the classroom when we indeed did enter deep discussion of Biblical interpretation. On a

few occasions, students asked right out why we were spending so much time discussing the Bible in the language class. My most successful response to such an interjection was to simply admit to the students that such excursions into Biblical interpretation were indeed uncustomary in the classroom. The one or two hardened students seemed to then mollify when I explained how I felt it important to wrestle through these issues in a Christian classroom. I told them that I think about these issues a lot, and I was interested in their opinion on the matter. After that sort of frank admission, most students seemed to accept the project better and even show some eagerness to think through the issues together.

### **Thoughts on integrating Biblical material into the foreign language course**

This leads to a final issue identified by all instructors involved, namely that studying these Scripture passages in the manner we did brings up confusion as to where the lines between devotion and intellectual study lie. The survey results bear this out too. The question garnering the lowest percentage of “strong agreement” was the one that asked whether they were edified by the Scripture study. In some sense, this awkwardness is not surprising. Given the ethos of enlightened modernity that pervades the academy, even Christian students have cultivated the instinct to separate their piety from intellectual pursuits. So when the foreign language teacher hauls out the Bible, that’s considered devotions. When we go to class, learn the material, study for the test, and show our mettle during exams, that’s considered intellectual study. Underlying the awkwardness that accompanies such a blatant effort to wrestle with Scriptural directives within the foreign language class are preconceived notions about the borders of instruction. Along with these predefined barriers comes a perception of intrusion—that the Scriptural material, when taken up in the heart of the class, is treading on forbidden territory. Perhaps the most rewarding result of this experiment is that it has put before us concretely an opportunity to rethink the contours of core-level language instruction. Can sustained and in depth investigation of Scriptural thought on language and diversity become a more integral part of the FL course content, or must it remain a sort of add-on concept? Through this experiment, and with the feedback of our students, we trust we are moving in a direction that can remedy the compartmentalization that we tend to create between language learning and Christian pi-

ety. In doing so, we have an opportunity to expand the students notion of Bible study itself. Are we not edified as language learners when we come to a deeper understanding of Scriptural mandates for the very task we have undertaken? Must our interaction with Scripture be only a one of a personal matter or one relegated to Sunday worship or to Christian fellowship groups? Certainly not. Nevertheless, our Christian students have brought to our attention that wrestling with Scriptural themes and passages in the foreign language classroom is unfamiliar territory. The irony of the situation ought not escape us. We do well to take this reminder as a prod to model for them—in the classroom—how to wrestle earnestly with Biblical treatment of the themes relevant to the acquisition of a foreign language.

The survey feedback suggests that it is possible, in a general sense, to effect a shift in the foreign language student's attitude about learning the subject matter. In a specific sense, this study homes in on a particular area of motivational factors, namely a Christian rationale for and understanding of the enterprise of foreign language learning. While the scope and rigor of the study is admittedly modest, the informal study provides helpful initial data on the motivations and attitudes that Christian students bring to the classroom in a North American Christian college. The data gathered at the outset and at the close of a semester suggest that such students perceive an array of reasons for learning another language. Students seem, however, to have thought less broadly about Christian motivations for foreign language learning. The project, furthermore, suggests that students are receptive to considering the Scriptural foundations for foreign language learning, and they are able to articulate Biblical themes that pertain to their course of language study once they have been exposed to pertinent Scriptural passages. The study also suggests that using devotional time in a way that is integrated with curriculum can be an effective method of shaping students' understanding of faith-based motivation to learn the subject matter. Finally, the study points to opportunities for learning more on the topic through empirically rigorous studies. Studies encompassing multiple institutions, or even those factoring in denominational affiliation would also yield data and information toward our better understanding of the dynamics at work in teaching our foreign language students at faith-based schools, or at least in a faith-based manner.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This is the wording used in the web version of Calvin College's mission statement (see <http://www.calvin.edu/about/mission.htm>). For other articulations of this mission see *An Expanded Statement of the Mission of Calvin College: Vision, Purpose, Commitment* (Grand Rapids: Calvin College, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> To avoid unnecessary and wordy circumvention, I will henceforth readily use the first person plural in referring to this project.

<sup>3</sup> Excerpt from departmental document containing a statement on teaching virtues in "core" (general education) language courses.

<sup>4</sup> *An Engagement with God's World: the Core Curriculum of Calvin College* (Grand Rapids: Calvin College, 1999) 43. An abridged version of this document is printed as an appendix in Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Engaging God's World: A Reformed Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> See Jane Thayer, Christine D. Bothne, Robert D. Bates, "Christian College Students' Perceptions of Faculty Spirituality," *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2000): 205-221; the authors' study finds the inclusion of opening prayer and devotions to be two of the top four criteria by which students evaluate faculty spirituality.

<sup>6</sup> *An Engagement with God's World*, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the faculty handbook directs instructors to begin morning classes with a devotion or prayer.

<sup>8</sup> *Calvin College Catalog 2001/2002*, p. 73. This wording is found in the catalog description of the mandatory general education course "Developing the Christian Mind."

<sup>9</sup> David I. Smith and Barbara Carvill, *The Gift of the Stranger: Faith Hospitality, and Foreign Language Learning* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. David Smith, "What Hope After Babel? Diversity and Community in Gen 11:1-9; Exod 1:1-14; Zeph 3:1-13 and Acts 2:1-13" *Horizons in Biblical Theology* vol. 18, no. 2 (1996) 169-191.

<sup>11</sup> For a helpful interpretation of the parable see Thomas R. Thompson, "New Heroes: A Meditation for a Multicultural Year," *The One in the Many: Christian Identity in a Multicultural World*, edited by Thomas R. Thompson (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America) 1998: 103-108.

<sup>12</sup> It is perhaps worth noting here that this devotional project has continued in subsequent semesters. Although no formal data beyond the boundaries

of the study described in this paper have been factored into this report, our informal observation has been that such displays of students' discomfort or impatience seem to have diminished as our presentations have become more polished.

<sup>13</sup> Regarding that next round—which has happened since the completion of the initial round of the project: through increased use of standardized PowerPoint-based exercises and careful apportioning of themes, we are finding it possible to achieve a greater sense of normality in the eyes of students and shorter times spent in exposition while still covering the important themes.

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