A Christian Perspective of the Language Learner

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A Christian Perspective

From a Christian perspective, we must recognize that humans were created and born with the ability to speak. So, was that ability for language only part of our design since we were made in God's image, was that design God's gift to us, or can it be both? After reading Dr. Robison's article, “Language from a Christian Perspective Reconsidered,” my belief is that language is both a part of our design and God's gift to us and, as such, we should view language not only as a method of communication, but as a means for lifting each other up, sharing God's word, and providing opportunities for ourselves and others to grow. Our words, described in the Bible as “the tongue,” can be used, as Robison (2011) states, to “exercise God-given dominion or to challenge God's sovereignty” (p. 8), so we should treat language and language acquisition within the context of respect and honesty.

Before reading this article, I would have argued that language is only a part of us because it is a part of God. Since we were made in God's image and God speaks (Robison, 2011, p. 3) we must also have the capacity to speak. However, what I found uniquely interesting in Dr. Robison's (2011) article is that “humans are less than God, since they are made in His image and are not themselves images of God” (p. 6) which makes me believe now that God allowed us to be designed with this innate ability to use language, making it His design and gift to us.

Because the use of language is a precious gift, I feel that we have a moral responsibility as human beings to edify one another with our words. The bible says that by “speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ” (Eph. 4:15, NIV). If our purpose is to grow closer to God and exemplify and honor Him with our lives, then that scripture reminds us that how we speak to others can affect our
relationship with Him. In fact, scripture and research tells us that “the tongue is tied to the heart; to guard the one is to guard the other. It is because of this that individuals can be justified or condemned solely on the basis of their speech” (Robison, 2011, p. 9).

Learners as Spiritual Beings

The idea that language is given to us by God increases the responsibility I feel as a language instructor to model for my students the positive ways in which language should be used. Since second language acquisition is obtained heavily via the environment and culture the learner is surround by, I hope my classroom would be a culture and climate of mutual respect, honesty, love, and encouragement. When students see the benefit of language as a tool for these gifts, my hope is they would grow and be encouraged to use language in meaningful and uplifting ways on their own. Language is powerful and as teachers we have a responsibility to wield and channel that power into positive avenues for our students.

To view my students as spiritual beings, as persons made in God's image, means to value them as people and learn about what connects them to others. Learning is as much about connecting with other people as it is about connecting with the curriculum; this is especially true with language learning.

One intrinsic element to language learning is vulnerability. Being vulnerable often means not being a surface layer player, but sharing about yourself on a deeper level. This goes back to the important role people have in both our language development and spiritual growth. My pastor at church always says that when he visits people on their death bed, they don't ask to be surrounded by their trophies, their promotions, or their awards; they ask to be surrounded by the people they love. Smith (2009) supports this thought by posing these important questions to his
students: “If people are likely to be the most important thing to you if you live to be 93, does that affect what you value now? Does it suggest any grounds for reflection on the choices you will make and the priorities you will set between now and then?” (p. 10) I can’t ask these questions of my students unless I am able to answer them myself. If I believe people have such a strong level of importance in life and that, as a teacher, I am an integral part of their language development and spiritual growth, then I have to look at my students, and my teaching, differently.

The relationship between language development and spiritual growth, to me and to teaching in the language learning classroom, is that people share about themselves through writing, speaking, and listening. The role I have in the classroom is to model the level of vulnerability and depth I want to see in my students through my character and the language choices I make, to allow my students the opportunities to grow spiritually. When we teach our students as spiritual beings “it means combining the processes of language learning with matters such as ethics, hospitality, failure, the nature of the good life, questions of value and the source of hope, responses to human need, cross-generational interaction” (Smith, 2009, p. 10). It is a complete shift from the superficial mindset put upon by the world to a focus put upon us by God to connect with the world around us on a spiritual level. I believe that the nature of language intrinsically emphasizes the power and influence we have on our students: “You can’t teach without assuming some vision of what a person is. And it matters what vision you assume, because your learners learn what they are as learners by the ways that you teach them” (Smith, 2009, p.11).

In my second language classroom, my students will be living in America and exposed to the language and culture by friends and their interactions around town. However, I will be their
first academic and language influence, and this influence could affect how they perceive school, learning, and their language acquisition. My influence as a teacher cannot be discounted. The ESL students at my school often bond with their ESL teacher, more than any of their other teachers. They want to hang out before school and pop in at lunch; they want – and crave – the extra support and attention and it is up to me to make sure that attention is modeling an unbiased cultural world view and language view. My students will learn acceptance of others and remain open minded to new cultural and language variances.
References
