

could you explain how? My teaching has been influenced by great professors at Sterling College, Sterling, Kansas, (Dr. Sara MacDonald, Ms. Fran Calderwood,

and Dr. George Stone) who modeled creative thinking, solid teaching methods, and a sincere desire for students to succeed academically, spiritually, and personally. In

addition, my Japanese teacher demonstrated the skills vital to teach a second language that students can embrace and internalize.



Be BOLD: Responding to Criticism and Promoting Further Dialogue

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“The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting.

It has been found difficult; and left untried” (Chesterton, 1994, p. 37).

Introduction

Christians and missionaries involved in English language teaching (ELT) have been the subject of recent criticism (see, e.g., Edge, 2003; Johnston & Varghese, 2006; Karmani & Pennycook, 2003; Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2003; Ramanathan & Pennycook, 2007). Much criticism has been directed towards the ethics of using English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) teaching for evangelism and missionary activity. Pennycook

and Makoni (2005), for example, argue:

With the massive increase in the global demand for English, the language has now become the bait for the missionary hook...there appears to be no concern about viewing the increased demand for English as ‘a gold mine rich with mission opportunity.’ Nor does the question of gaining students’ trust in order to preach the gospel appear to raise ethical questions about this pedagogy. (pp. 141-142)

With its clear God-given mandate to spread and preach the gospel, some critics find Christianity to be at odds with the role of an impartial teacher. How then should a Christian respond? I would humbly suggest that one be **BOLD: Be** a true Christ-follower, **Only** hold to moral absolutes, **Love** each student unconditionally, and **Do** everything with excellence.

As followers of Christ, our response must begin with a clarification of definitions. The next response must involve the agreement on and establishment of moral absolutes. The last response

represents a first-step of sorts in establishing ethical standards that would be applicable to all ESL/EFL teaching.

Some of the concerns and criticisms that have been raised against Christians are indeed valid. Christians and Christian organizations by no means claim to be faultless. Some may even be intentionally engaged in unethical or immoral activities and should certainly be criticized for them. Yet the focus of this article is the basis on which we can discern innocence or guilt. I hope to achieve two purposes here: first, to dispel the myth of moral relativism, and, second, to start dialogue towards establishing universal ethics and standards for ESL/EFL instruction. I look forward to future dialogue and discussion from the ELT community to come to agreement on more standards that could be universally applicable (perhaps a Ten Commandments of sorts).

Be a True Christ-Follower

Our discussion in responding to these criticisms must first begin with an accepted definition of what a Christian is and believes. Terms such as 'conservative-right' or 'liberal-left' are of little help. In fact, the term 'Christian' itself seems to have become pejorative. Pennycook and Coutand-Marin (2003) portray us as follows: "... once the mission becomes to spread Christianity itself, and particularly when that message becomes conflated with right-wing politics, we are dealing with a project always more oriented towards the opposites of disparity, difference and desire: conformity, conservatism and coercion" (p. 351). Yet an extreme 'right-wing' agenda is not inextricably tied with Christianity – as some would lead us to believe.

To avoid confusing and politically loaded connotations, I will use a more precise and coherent label: Christ-follower. In its most basic sense, a Christ-follower is simply a person who believes Jesus Christ to be his or her Lord and Savior, and who follows the commands of the Bible. Making this distinction of a Christ-follower is crucial precisely because the basis for making any judgment or criticism needs to be grounded in some agreed upon standard. If a Christ-follower or a Christ-following missions organization professes to obey Christ and follow the commands of the Bible, then they ought to be held accountable by such standards.

The following section argues for the existence of moral absolutes. For a Christ-follower, these standards come undeniably from

God. For others, the moral standards may originate from someone or something else. Whether the moral law giver is in fact the Christian God is beyond the scope of this article. The point is simply that we live in a world in which morality and ethics are governed by a universal standard.

Only Hold to Moral Absolutes

Those who criticize Christian ESL/EFL teachers often come from a morally relative ideology. Johnston and Varghese (2006) state that, "The absence of all-powerful conceptual frameworks and the multiplicity of voices and value systems that is the postmodern condition force us to continually doubt the absoluteness of any belief or value" (p. 199). Pennycook and Coutand-Marin (2003) argue that the "...moral project of TEML [teaching English as missionary language] all too often lacks an adequate ethics. While religious thinking is supposed to encourage engagement with hard ethical questions, all too often it does little more than promote a prior moral absolutism" (p. 351). The criticisms cited against Christians and ELT missionaries presuppose that there has been a breach of some ethical or moral standard. Yet we immediately detect a contradiction. It is puzzling how Pennycook and Coutand-Marin can simultaneously criticize missionaries of holding to 'moral absolutism' yet lacking 'adequate ethics'. This would only make sense in a world in which moral relativism is true.

"Moral relativism teaches that when it comes to morals, that which is ethically right or wrong, people do their own thing. Ethical truths depend on the individuals and groups who hold them" (Beckwith & Koukl, 1998, p. 28). Therefore, when ELT missionaries are criticized for lacking 'adequate ethics', their ethics are said to be faulty simply because they do not align with the moral standards held by critics like Pennycook and Coutand-Marin. Yet the dilemma for moral relativists is how they can explain why their standards must supersede the standards of the ELT missionaries they condemn.

The reality is that moral relativism is an utterly sterile and bankrupt ideology. If it were true, no person could ever protest, "You shouldn't push your religious views and beliefs on me". This could summarily be countered with, "Why not? You shouldn't force that belief on me". Lewis (2001) argues that, "Quarrelling means trying to show that the other man is in the wrong. And there would be no sense in trying to do that unless you and he had some sort of agreement as to what Right and Wrong are; just as there would be no sense in saying that a footballer had committed a foul unless there was some agreement about the rules of football" (p. 4). He correctly states that if there is no universal agreement on the rules of conduct, then there is no basis for criticizing someone for unethical behavior. If ethics are simply governed by personal taste, "then you surrender the possibility of making moral judgments about the others' actions, no matter how offensive they are to your intuitive

sense of right or wrong. You may express your emotions, tastes, and personal preferences, but you can't say they are wrong" (Beckwith & Koukl, 1998, pp. 61-62). We are left with a world in which no moral or ethical standard could ever be demanded. Even a sense of fairness and justice would be void of any common grounding. Johnston (2003) recognizes how he is left with baseless criticisms against a Christian teacher: "Ultimately, our rejection of his practices can only be based either in legal arguments (which are only indirectly related to moral judgments) or in our own beliefs, themselves rooted in faith, like the teacher's, not in logical argument" (p. 114). Without moral absolutes, the basis for rejecting evangelism or indoctrination in the classroom is only based on personal taste.

Nevertheless, this has not prevented moral relativists from criticizing the ethos of Christian ESL teachers. Pennycook and Coutand-Marin (2003) declare: "Our point here is that it is this central belief in a natural state of things that stems from God, which is therefore unquestionable, that is the most dangerous as a fundamentalist belief" (p. 345). In reality, the most dangerous and destructive doctrine is a world in which moral relativism is held to be true:

On their view, the worst that could be said of Charles Manson is that he had a bad-hair day or of Jeffrey Dahmer that he had an eating disorder. Simply denying morality is not good enough. One needs to offer some compelling reason why rape, torturing a newborn child for pleasure, or punishing innocent persons are morally benign. (Beckwith & Koukl, 1998, p. 153)

Moral relativists have much to answer for. Pennycook and Coutand-Marin (2003) continue saying, "When coupled with an English language teaching project, it is this unquestioning belief in God-given conditions, coupled to a highly conservative agenda, that presents a serious threat to the world" (p. 345). If morality is relative, these two critics must explain why their personal opinions about missionaries and Christians posing a serious threat to ESL/EFL should have any relevance to the rest of the world.

A moral relativist may be quick to argue that it is not necessarily the individual that dictates the moral and ethical standards, but it is the standards agreed upon by a group or society. Yet, one can quickly see how this ideology is also illogical and self-defeating. For example, the forced labor and extermination of six million Jews by Nazi Germany could not have been condemned by a minority of Germans who might have opposed it. In fact, the Germans who disapproved these unconscionable acts, "...would have had a moral obligation to participate in the murder of innocent people... All those under the authority of the Third Reich—their ruling society—would have been morally bound to cooperate in genocide" (Beckwith & Koukl, 1998, p. 51). It is clear that we live in a world in which morality and ethics are not subjectively established by any individual or any society.

Christ-followers as I have defined them believe that moral and ethical absolutes exist because they have been set in place by God. The Bible makes it clear that God has not only established a moral conscience in each of our hearts, but that the Bible itself is instructive in ethical and moral standards (Romans 2:14-15, 2

Timothy 3:16-17). Various scholars have demonstrated the accuracy, reliability, validity, and historicity of the Bible (see, e.g., Bruce, 2003; Blomberg, 2007; Kitchen, 2003; McDowell, 1999). The truth remains that a universal ethic and moral law exists for all to follow.

The acknowledgement and acceptance of moral absolutes by all teachers is crucial precisely because the nature of teaching is inherently one of change and persuasion (Baurain, 2007, p. 205). Varghese and Johnston (2007) find evangelical Christian teaching to be objectionable because teachers may be propagating a certain set of beliefs in the classroom. Yet in their discussion they admit that "...nonevangelical TESOL [Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages] is of course not so pure in this regard, either" (p. 26). Pennycook (1994) recognizes such an impossibility and says, "...it is incumbent on us as teachers and applied linguists to discard ways of thinking about ELT as if it were some neutral enterprise and, instead, to start exploring the interests served by our work" (p. 24). He goes on to argue that moral neutrality is not only a myth but that the propagation of a particular belief or value is unavoidable: "It is not that as English language teachers we are necessarily either overt messiahs or duped messengers, but rather that the constant advocacy of certain teaching practices that have become bound up with the English language necessarily represents a constant advocacy for a particular way of life, a particular understanding of the world" (Pennycook, 1994, p. 178). If the emphasis and the propagation of a certain worldview are inevitable and unavoidable, the need for universal ethics is all the more crucial. Teaching ESL/EFL demands a

universal code of conduct and standards that govern its practice, and I now turn to this topic.

Productive dialogue and discussion is only possible after we have agreed on the existence of moral absolutes. If this can be accepted, we can agree that there must be universal standards that specifically govern ELT. I propose two ethical absolutes in the hopes of initiating future discussion and exploration of the standards that would specifically apply to teaching English.

Love Each Student Unconditionally

The first ethical standard I propose is for all teachers to love each student unconditionally and show no favoritism. The Bible teaches us, “brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism” (James 2:1, TNIV). We are commanded to love each person with unconditional love: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43-44, TNIV). According to these verses, Christ-followers have an ethical and moral responsibility to love each person and to treat people equally.

It is no secret that a Christ-follower in ESL / EFL hopes for the salvation of all people, including his or her students. Snow (2001) discusses the effect of impartial conduct:

If what students see in a CET [Christian English Teacher] is equal interest, care, and attention toward all students, no matter how they feel about the CET’s faith, the witness of the CET will gain credibility from responsible handling of power and influence. It will also reflect the fact that God loves all of his children,

not only those who have already responded to his call. (p. 79)

It would certainly be unethical and unbiblical to neglect some students simply because they show no interest in the Bible. Demanding or expecting conversion in exchange for teaching would be a further violation of this ethic. Ultimately, the standard to love each student unconditionally goes beyond Christ-following teachers. Fair and equal treatment of each student is a moral obligation for all teachers. Regardless of religious or political beliefs, each student ought to receive equal attention and devotion from his or her teacher.

Do Everything With Excellence

The second ethical standard I propose is for each teacher to do everything with excellence. Teachers have a moral and ethical obligation to provide quality education for their students. Some Christians and missions organizations have been accused of using English teaching as a means of gaining access to non-Christians. Yet the primary duty of an ESL / EFL teacher is to provide English education. It is indeed unethical and unbiblical to neglect one’s teaching obligations in order to focus solely on evangelism. Not only will Christ-followers lose respect and influence if they neglect their professional duties, it will also be an affront to God.

The Bible teaches us, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving” (Colossians 3:23-24, TNIV). God has clear expectations of Christ-followers in regard to their job or profession. By working hard and being diligent, Christ-followers

ultimately bring honor to God: “Doing all professional tasks is an expression of devotion to God, not simply a good thing to do. Again, many in the field of TESOL approach their work with diligence and excellence; however, as a Christian I have an extra incentive to do a good job” (Purgason, 2009, p. 189).

This obligation to do all things with excellence applies to all teachers, not just Christ-followers. Each teacher has a duty to be equipped and trained to teach each class well. Appropriate training and preparation ought to be a prerequisite for any teacher. Doing everything with excellence also involves putting the interests and needs of students above all else. Just as it would be unethical for a Christ-following teacher to neglect his or her teaching duties for evangelism, it would be unethical for other teachers to neglect their duties for other personal priorities.

I believe that morality and ethics concerning ELT are not dictated by personal preference or taste. Instead, universal standards exist that govern the teaching of English. In these sections I have proposed two standards in the hopes of establishing more explicitly the expected ethics and standards of ELT. These suggestions can serve as universal standards not only for Christ-following ESL / EFL teachers, but also for the ELT community at large.

Conclusion

Christ-followers don’t claim to uphold moral and ethical standards perfectly. We do fall short and make mistakes: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23, TNIV). Christ-followers also believe that our actions will be scrutinized by others and ultimately judged by God: “Nothing in all

creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:13, TNIV). Some of the criticisms that have been leveled at Christ-followers involved in ELT are legitimate. Yet the reason that these criticisms are valid is not because the actions of some missionaries and Christ-followers are simply distasteful to certain individuals. Certain actions can only be condemned because they betray a universal standard. When we come to agree on the existence of moral and ethical absolutes, we may finally have the basis for calling others to account in the profession of ESL / EFL. Once this is established, constructive criticism and dialogue can take place.

"We must pursue both respect for people's worth and integrity and respect for the worth and integrity of truth. If I met people who did not believe in gravity, I would certainly treat them with respect and dignity, but I would just as certainly work to change that belief" (Baurain, 2007 p. 212). We indeed have a moral obligation to respect each of our students, but there is a moral obligation to respect absolute truth as well. I have argued above that we live in a world in which moral absolutes do exist. As a Christ-follower I also believe that these moral absolutes have been set in place by a moral lawgiver, God. Many Christ-followers have examined the veracity of the Bible and Jesus Christ and have found them to be true and trustworthy. I invite others to seek absolute truth and discover the moral and ethical standards that undergird our lives so that "...you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32, TNIV).

As Christians in ELT, we should be **BOLD: Be** true Christ-followers,

Only hold to moral absolutes, **Love** each student unconditionally, and **Do** everything with excellence.

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