

## English Bible Study

as a Comprehensive Approach to Language Learning

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This paper will describe an approach to language learning which focuses on the content of a series of selected readings rather than a particular facet of the language such as pronunciation, listening, or writing. It seeks to incorporate all aspects of the language. Through active participation in this process, the student works to increase skills in each area, as well as gain an understanding of the stories themselves.

The following discussion includes some purposes of this alternative way of learning, as well as teaching techniques and materials which have been helpful in employing it for the past two years. The Bible is the text for these classes, which cover two school years' time. The pupils are women's junior college students, almost all from age eighteen to twenty. These courses are required parts of the school curriculum. The vast majority of students have never learned the Bible before. Approximately one percent of these students is Christian. Class size is typically forty-five to fifty students, and these meet once per week for ninety minutes. There is a considerable gap between the English skill levels of a given class's top and bottom students.

The primary objectives of this approach to learning are both to communicate the content of the Bible passages and to improve English skills in speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

Through engaging in this learning process, the student also has an opportunity for personal growth. This course introduces the Bible's teachings through the format of issues that pertain to

daily life. Each week's class focuses on a subject such as marriage, divorce, money, or relationships with parents.

In learning the Bible's teachings, students have an opportunity to reflect on their own opinions and beliefs related to these issues. Many think seriously about them for the first time. Commonly students of this age level may be in the process of re-thinking and re-interpreting the value systems *they have received from their families and society while children*. Now attempting to build a system of values on which they can base their own lives as they move into adulthood, they may use this course to gain a clearer grasp on what they believe and consider important. With the Bible's teachings as one more frame of reference, they may be able to choose their own lifestyles to a greater extent and do so with a broader perspective than they otherwise would.

On the first day, first year students respond to the question of *what they would like to receive from their study*. Student evaluations of the class also indicate something of their wishes. A few usually express resistance to studying a religious subject as a required course. The most common response is a desire to acquire greater English ability. Other common responses include the desire to grow in maturity by becoming more open-minded and understanding ways of thinking they have not encountered before. A few indicate that they are seeking something to meet a more particular personal emotional-spiritual need and want to try to *find it in the Bible*. *The desire to understand the Bible as an important influence on Western people is another common response*, as is the interest in knowing about it as a book strongly influencing world literature. A less common response is the wish to understand history through the Bible.

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### Methods

With these goals in mind, first year students learn the New Testament, and second year students learn the Old Testament. The intent is to present the most central parts of the Bible first and continue referring to them throughout the entire study, allowing for repetition of key ideas and the teachings of Jesus as a basis for understanding the other parts of the Bible.

Particularly to overcome the difficulties of relatively large numbers of students per class and the inevitable gap in levels of proficiency in such a situation, the class uses learning techniques in which as many students as possible can actively participate and learn English which is appropriate for their individual skill levels.

One means of doing this is to have a short quiz at the beginning of each class, rather than a comprehensive test at the end of the term. A quiz of only four multiple choice questions (about fifteen minutes), for example, does not occupy a large part of the class time, but it does serve to motivate most students to study what they have covered in class. The purposes of doing this type of testing are not only measuring the students' understanding of that day's story but using the test as a teaching tool, as well. As soon as the test is finished, the class reviews the answers and receives an explanation of each one. As well as focusing the listening and eliciting a response from each student, this means of testing serves to keep the number of absentees relatively low, and it cuts down on students' arriving late for class, since they forfeit that day's quiz grade by doing so. It also provides a means of taking role (checking the computerized quiz cards) outside class rather than calling many names each class. These quizzes cover the material which the class studied in the previous meeting. Although most students encounter the reading for the first time without the benefit of prior exposure or preparation, they do have

the benefit of the teacher's explanation, the presentation of the reading through various media, and repetition through reading parts of the story aloud. For the sake of comparing the benefits of teaching in this way, some classes held the quiz not over the previous week's material but over the material to be studied in that same day's class following the quiz. While allowing students to be somewhat better prepared to understand the lesson immediately following the test, this way of testing showed no significant difference in performance on quizzes compared to testing later in the learning process.

Another high-participation activity is watching the story for that day on video. Most stories on the selected reading list are available in the form of English videos which take five to ten minutes to see. A brief explanation of the background and story precede the video itself. The teacher gives a few listening questions (usually three) for the students to answer by writing the words that they hear in the video. The English is generally too fast for most students to understand the first time, but they can grasp much visually, part audibly, and they will soon hear and then read the story again and come to comprehend more and more.

After showing the whole story once from start to finish, the teacher rewinds to the points of the desired answers and lets the class hear them again. Each pupil writes what she hears on a paper she will turn in at the end of class. Usually four or five repetitions are necessary (depending on the length of the given sentence, the particular class's listening skills, attentiveness at that particular time of day in that particular place, etc.). The teacher calls the name of an individual student, who gives her answer as she has heard it. Often, only a part of the whole sentence is understandable. It is often helpful for the teacher to rephrase the sentence, ask the pupil to rephrase it to show she grasps the main

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idea, or say the same sentence at normal speed in his/her own voice. The teacher's voice is often easier to understand, and it is usually possible to elicit the correct answer this way. If not, saying it in an unusually slow, clear voice almost always receives the correct response. After receiving the correct answer, the teacher gives a brief explanation of the sentence and the teaching it conveys.

Varying the way of studying the video may also contribute to a greater variety of English skills. For example, the teacher may scramble the words to the answer, write them on the chalk board, and give the students a few minutes to arrange them in the order they suppose to be best before playing the video and letting the students check their written answers against what they hear.

The teacher may write a rephrased version of the answer and ask the students to write the video version which they hear.

Another alternative is writing a sentence on the board with some key words missing. After having the students write their own ideas for possibilities individually, the teacher calls on several students to give their answers. Indicating if these answers are correct, the teacher in this way collects perhaps several answers which are acceptable in the context of the video story. The class then listens to the video and writes the words they hear, which the teacher then checks with them. One more option is to not use the sound on the regular video track at all but for the teacher to tell the story in his/her own words, using simpler, clearer English. Comprehension questions over the explanation may not deal with a single sentence as in the above explanation but with a longer talk. Questions may require the listeners to comprehend not only individual words or sentences but the flow and main ideas of the entire talk.

For variety's sake or when there is no video available for a particular passage, music can provide an alternative means of

presenting the material. A song, the lyrics of which relate to the Bible passage and theme for that day, may be useful, provided its lyrics are clear, slow, and fairly simple. Reading the words (with a few chosen individual words or a short phrase deleted) and then listening continuously from start to finish once, pupils usually can fill in part of the missing words. Listening to the deleted sections two more times is normally enough for most students to understand the majority of the needed words. If more listening is necessary, the class can pursue the correct answers in the same way as in the video study. These forms of listening practice usually take from thirty to forty minutes altogether.

To follow up on the teaching through music or the video version of the story and give a different angle to the same passage, the class next reads a short section for pronunciation practice and to increase comprehension. One student reads a verse, then the *teacher repeats it*, then the whole class says it. The teacher comments on the verse's meaning and points out problem words and unnatural intonation and models them for the class, which repeats them.

If there are continued problems with individual words, the class works on them, often using minimal pair practice ("law" and "low," "full" and "fool") after hearing a brief explanation of how to make the sound phonetically. The teacher says the two words, changing the order at random, and the students repeat what they hear. The teacher writes "1" and then "2" beside the words in the order they came, and students can check to see if what they said matches. This and verbal feedback to what they say, first as a group and then while checking a few students as individuals, allows them to check their own pronunciation to an extent.

In order to bring together the ideas the reading has conveyed up to this point, it may be necessary to give a brief explanation

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of the main teachings of the passage, as well as background or other relevant information such as idioms or proverbs that have come into English from the reading under consideration. Giving these as brief notes for the students to write may be useful, although it is slow and takes the full concentration of most students, so that any further explanation usually must wait until all have finished the copy work. This one-directional approach to study usually lasts only five or ten minutes.

In order to present the lesson in as relevant and applicable a way as possible to the students, teaching through case studies may be a helpful approach. The class hears a story about a person in a particular situation (usually about five minutes long). Most case studies are of real people, usually Japanese, usually female, and usually somewhere near the students' age level. Students divide into groups of two and spend four or five minutes discussing questions related to the story. They write their ideas in very short English answers, which they must turn in at the end of class. After the pair discussion, the entire class together compares their answers, and the teacher re-summarizes the Bible's teachings on the subject.

For example, the class hears the story of a thirty-three year old, married lady living in Sapporo, whom we call Minako. She and her husband have no children but want to be parents. Three years ago, Minako gave birth to a sick baby who died within one month of birth. Her doctor says that if she is pregnant again, there is a seventy-five percent chance that a similar problem will occur. She and her husband want to make a choice of what to do before many more years pass and age becomes a significant factor.

The Bible story for this day is the Genesis creation account, and the central teaching is that God is the giver of life. The students discuss with their partners the questions, "If you were in

Minako's situation, what would you do?" and "What does today's Bible story teach that could help a couple decide what to do in a situation like this?" While students are discussing, the teacher can talk with a few of the pairs and check the English of their answers. Without this check, it is difficult for most to give their answers with peers listening. But if certain of the English, almost all can respond when the discussion time is finished and the teacher asks for a variety of answers. These usually range from (1) giving up because of the danger to the child and the mother to (2) trying to adopt a child to (3) another type of surrogate parenthood to (4) trying for a natural birth. After listing these on the chalk board, the teacher points to each and asks students to raise hands to indicate their choices. Having noted these, the teacher continues the real story and explains this Christian couple's choice to try for a natural birth; their belief that God, who gives life, was leading them in this direction in this particular situation; the discovery that Minako was pregnant with twins; and their safe delivery despite circumstances even more dangerous than expected.

It normally is difficult, especially for first year students, to follow these and other descriptions of the reading's content when it is solely in English. When rating themselves in class, most beginning-level first year students say they understand fifty percent or less. A few in the same classes indicate they understand eighty to ninety percent. Second year students often rate themselves as comprehending between seventy and ninety percent, while there are a few exceptions on both ends of the spectrum.

As a result, following the English explanation (of the quiz answers being checked, the video or song's words, the general explanation, as well as the case studies), there is a similar explanation in Japanese. There is no attempt at a direct or line-by-line interpretation, and the class receives encouragement to use this ex-

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planation only as a check of their English listening ability. Also, as the students progress through the two-year program and become more capable of comprehending the English they hear, the Japanese explanations become fewer and simpler.

One problem with a class of this type is the obvious difficulty in having individual dialogue between the teacher and the many students. One way to overcome this, at least partially, is through reports. Students have the option of putting these in written form or on audio cassette. The teacher responds with comments, questions, and notes about particular problems with the report's English, as well as its content. Each student is free to turn in reports only if she chooses, as many or few as she chooses, the length she chooses, and in any week's class period she chooses. A student who submits no reports has only her quiz scores for a grade. A student who gives many reports has a relatively large number of points in addition to her quiz scores. The teacher sets the number of added points on a curved scale.

These reports are of two types. The first is a reflection report, which includes (1) the student's understanding of the Bible's teachings on any of the subjects the class studies (divorce, friendships, etc.), (2) the student's own ideas about this, and (3) any personal experiences she has which relate to the subject. Students understand that grades come from the clarity of expression and amount of relevant work they do, not from whether their ideas agree with the Bible's teachings or not.

A second type of report involves reading a Bible passage which is not on the in-class reading list. The student also reads a book by a Christian author or sees a video from a list the teacher provides and makes a comparison of it with the Bible reading, reflecting on common themes and personal impressions. The readings are usually in Japanese, while the reports are in either written or spoken English.

## Teaching Materials

This class uses the Today's English Version Good News Bible (American Bible Society, New York, 1976). Students also have the Shin Kyodo Yaku Seisho in Japanese (Japan Bible Society, Tokyo, 1988). The New Media Bible, produced by the American-based evangelical group the Genesis Project and distributed in Japan through Inochi no Kotoba Sha of Tokyo, includes a video account of the Gospel of Luke and one of the Book of Genesis. The English version has nothing except the words of the Bible themselves, so they provide a close parallel to the passages students read in the Today's English Version. Another video series which serves as supplementary material is the series The World of the Bible Seen in Israel (Myrtos, Tokyo, 1986). This has been useful in showing the geographical, historical, and religious background of the Bible.

## Conclusion

In general, progress in listening, writing, and pronunciation appear greater than in speaking or reading for students using this approach to learning English. They demonstrate an ability to encounter a passage for the first time and respond satisfactorily on oral quizzes over it after reading, discussing, and hearing explanations on it. Comprehension of passages in narrative form show consistently higher test scores than poetry, wisdom literature, or prophecy passages. Progress in listening ability is evident in the classroom activities, most students coming to understand words which they could not catch on the first or second try. Students show the ability to grasp single words, sentences, and longer explanations which they previously could not. Pronunciation improvement is easily recognizable in the in-class work.

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Reports reflect the students' ability to express themselves freely in writing and, for the smaller percentage of the students who choose this form of report, speaking. The reports also indicate much about the degree to which students comprehend the content of the Bible. This, of course, is very subjective. The reports' content also varies greatly, from very superficial discussions to expressions of profound spiritual experiences the students have had through this course of study.

# 聖書による英語の教育：言語習得のための 一包括的アプローチ

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## 要 約

本論は、学生が、精選された一連の書物を通じて英語の技術を向上させようとする場合の一つのアプローチを示すものである。これは、聞く、話す、読む、そして書くことを含む広汎な教育内容をもつ。ゴールはふたつあって、英語技術の上達と読書内容の把握である。学生は、様々な活動を通じて聖書の一節（主に物語）に遭遇するものである。これには聖書の物語のビデオを見たり、その内容に関連した歌を聞いたり、声にだして読むこと、教師の説明を聞きとること、ケーススタディに関してグループ討論を行ったり、レポートの形で個人の考えを表現したりすることが含まれる。物語そのものの伝える意味をうけとることもそうであるが、こうした言語習得の方法は学生が英語能力レベルを高めるうえで有用である。これはとりわけ、聞き取り、発音、作文の分野において効果がある。