

# God in the classroom

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For the past 150 years in Japan, there has been a close relationship between Christian mission and English language education. Missionaries and churches have been heavily involved in the English language teaching profession during this time. Even today, there are many Christian ELT professionals working throughout Japan. However, there is a strong view within the ELT profession that religious beliefs should play no part in the classroom. This places the modern Christian language teacher in a dilemma: in what way, if at all, are a teacher's Christian beliefs to be expressed in class? This paper aims to shed some light on this question, by examining the nature of religious belief and expression in relation to language pedagogy.

この150年間、日本ではキリスト教の布教と英語教育は密接に関係してきた。その間、宣教師と教会が英語教育に深く携わってきた。今日でも、キリスト教信者である英語教育の専門家は日本中にたくさんいる。しかし、英語教育者の間には、教室内に宗教を持ち込むべきではないという根強い意見がある。これはキリスト教信者である現代の英語教育者にジレンマをもたらす。つまり、果たして教師はクラスで信仰をどのように表現したらよいのか。本論では、言語教育との関連において信仰と表現の本質を考察し、この問題に光を当てる。

## Evangelism and ELT: An ethical dilemma

Christian evangelism through English classes has been happening in Japan for over a century, and is still widespread today. The Japanese desire for English conversation, coupled with a very small native Christian community (3% of the total Japanese population, according to Operation World, 2012), makes this country very attractive to Christian missionaries. In addition, there are many Christians working in schools and universities, who are not missionaries, yet their faith seeks to find expression in their work.

However, there is an ethical dilemma facing this large number of Christian educators. In Japan, the teaching of religion is banned in public schools. Not only this, but there are strong feelings against proselytization from many within the ELT field. As a Christian teacher necessarily feels some desire to share his or her faith, a serious dilemma arises. It is hoped this article will help point the way out of this dilemma.

## Christian mission through ELT in Japan

Missionaries have been active in this country ever since the ban on Christianity was lifted in 1873 (Kohiyama, 2009). Many of Japan's top schools were started as a result of Christian influence, such as International Christian University (Tokyo), Doshisha University (Kyoto), Hokkaido University (Sapporo), Nanzan University (Nagoya), and many others. Although English classes at these schools do not usually contain any religious content, a teacher's faith does perhaps exert some influence on his or her chances of employment. McCrostie's job column in the TLT gave advice to increase your chances at landing a full-time position at a Japanese University. Amongst some useful tips was this one:

"Time to start praying? Another consideration when putting together an application package for a tenured job is that a number of universities in Japan are Christian institutions. The job ads from such schools typically call for applicants to show an understanding of the Christian faith... Make your understanding

of Christianity explicit in your cover letter or you will probably require divine intervention to get hired.” (McCrostie, 2010, p.32).

While these universities may prefer to hire Christian teachers, many Christian missionaries will start their own English schools, or else partner with a church to offer English lessons in a church building. Occasionally, missionaries may teach English at a non-Christian school in order to supplement their income (known as *tent-making*). According to Operation World (2010), there are an estimated 3,500 missionaries working in Japan. It is not known how many of these are using English conversation classes to gain converts. However, in a convenience sample of 15 full-time missionaries known to the author, 87% had been involved in evangelism through English lessons.

In addition to these, there are a lot more Christian English teachers who are not full-time missionaries, and so they would not appear in this data, but who nevertheless believe that they have a duty to share their faith with others. Most estimates of the number of Christians in English-speaking countries hover around 30% of the population, and so it would be reasonable to assume that roughly 30% of native English speaker teachers in Japan are Christian.

And yet, this not insignificant Christian presence has been mostly silent in the field's professional discourse. One reason could be that they are not interested in academic associations such as JALT. Particularly, missionaries who work in a church are kept very busy, and most of their time is taken up with church affairs.

Another reason is that there has been some hostility towards Christianity in the halls of academia. There have been charges against Christian English teachers as engaging in 'evangelism by stealth' (Edge, 2003), as having a lack of proper qualifications (Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2003), and as being tools of Western imperialism (Pennycook & Makoni, 2005). Such severe charges may make Christians reluctant to be open about their faith. Added to this, there is a generally more widespread belief, even among some Christians themselves, that matters of faith and religion have no place in matters of the mind. The two are seen as incompatible.

As an example, the English Teachers in Japan (ETJ) online discussion forum boasts over 5,500 members (ETJ, 2012). Although its purpose is for "discussing issues related to education", and "asking and giving advice on matters related

to teaching", the posting guidelines state that religion is to be "avoided". The implicit message is that issues concerning teaching and education should remain separate from issues of faith or belief. There was a heated exchange between some members in August 2010, on the topic of religious expression in the forum. Overall there were more posts in favour of silencing references to religion, although admittedly it is hard to know whether these views were just coming from a vocal minority. The general mood of the forum can be expressed by this post:

"Hello again. I agree with Sean (and others) and think that religious references should not be included in emails. I'm not very religious myself but I can imagine that Bible references must considerably irk the non-Christian members of this list. Let's stick to the guidelines: NO RELIGION!" (emphasis his). (ETJ, 2010).

These exchanges point to a commonly held assumption that religious belief and teaching practice should be kept separate. In fact, this is just one instance of a much more widely and commonly held belief in academia that scholarship and faith are incompatible. Many believe there is a strong dividing line between the private sphere (your personal beliefs, your values or ethical viewpoints) and the public sphere (your research and scientific scholarship; Pearcey, 2005).

However, this way of thinking is misguided. I wish to argue *not* that faith and ELT *shouldn't* be kept separate, but that they *cannot* be kept separate. This becomes apparent when we examine the nature of religious belief and teaching practice.

### The nature of ideological (religious) belief and teaching practice

Within the literature, ELT is portrayed as primarily a means by which to aid students in the acquisition of English language skills. Most of the articles in TLT or the JALT Journal are concerned with English language acquisition at a cognitive level. This is only natural, as that is what we as teachers are primarily concerned with. But one crucial aspect of our profession that gets nowhere near as much attention as it should, is that of ideology in teaching; and in particular, values. Language teaching is deeply permeated with ideas and values that impact every aspect of ELT, from classroom practice to curriculum design to assessment and material

development. Language teaching is profoundly a value-laden activity.

As Johnston (2003) writes, a teacher's personal belief system *cannot* be separated from his or her teaching practice. That is because teaching is value-laden in three ways. Firstly, teaching is rooted in relation. A relationship is established between teacher and student. And human relations are essentially in the sphere of morality. How you, as a person and a human being, interact with other persons, is primarily a question about morality.

Secondly, all teaching aims to change people. When students walk out of the classroom after 90 minutes, and then when they complete their course at the end of the semester, one hopes that they are changed individuals. If there is no change, you have to ask yourself, what was the point? One also hopes that this change will be for the "better". What exactly is "better" and what is "worse" is essentially a moral matter.

Thirdly, although science and research can give us sound theory and practical methods for teaching effectively, in a great number of instances they cannot tell us exactly how to run our classes. What do you do with the kid in the back row who falls asleep every lesson? How hard do you push the painfully shy girl who cannot utter two words the whole class? What do you do when the head of the Economics faculty asks you to pass a student whom you just failed?

Johnston writes: "In the decision-making processes of teaching, somewhere along the road rationality ceases to operate effectively. While many attempts at a rational morality have been made by philosophers, decisions and actions are motivated ultimately not by reason alone but also by beliefs held by individuals that cannot be based in or justified by reason alone. I call these kinds of beliefs *faith*, because they are based on a kind of trust we have in our own instincts, often bolstered by our personal experiences but rarely in the certainty that, for example, scientific knowledge can bring." (Johnston, 2003, p.9; emphasis his).

When Bill Johnston wrote these words in 2003, he was a self-confessed atheist. But despite this atheism, he still argues convincingly that *faith* plays a crucial role in our classrooms. It is not possible to separate faith from our pedagogical beliefs and practices. So whether your faith is Christian or Hindu or Buddhist or secular humanist or even atheist (and atheism perhaps requires even more faith than belief in a God), this faith *will* be outworked, in one way or

another, within your classroom. And any claim to the contrary is untenable.

However, just because faith cannot be kept separate from teaching practice, it does not necessarily follow that teachers should be allowed free reign to convert students to any particular religious viewpoint. So, where does one draw the line?

### The ethical dilemma

Herein lies the ethical dilemma. The evangelical Christian English teacher believes he or she has a moral (or divine) imperative to proclaim God's truth to nonbelievers, including his or her students. However, when it comes to matters of religion, there is a strongly held view by some within the ELT profession that God should be left outside the school doors.

Is there a way out of this dilemma? The argument for a blanket ban on expressions of faith in the classroom cannot be sustained. Yet at the other extreme, most would agree that complete freedom in seeking conversions in the classroom is likewise undesirable. Where one stands in relation to these extremes will be somewhat contingent upon one's individual teaching situation. Obviously, English classes that are held inside a church building with students being aware of the teacher's beliefs will carry different ethical demands to classes held in a high school where students have no choice over content or teacher.

However, I do agree with what the dominant voices in Christian ELT work are saying. These scholars see ELT *as* Christian Mission. In other words, being a good English teacher and running effective lessons is a right and proper expression of religious faith in itself, without blatantly opening a Bible or having a prayer meeting in class. This stance enables the Christian teacher to express his or her faith in a way that does not clash with those who are concerned about religious imperialism. Of course, teaching English to the best of one's ability is a moral imperative shared by many teachers, and not just those of the Christian faith. However, the motivation for doing so is quite different. A great many Christian leaders in ELT are saying: The quality of your work as an English teacher is the best way you can express your faith in Christ (also referred to as "being a witness").

For example, Donald Snow writes: "Rather than being incidental to witness or even evangelism, the quality of CET's (Christian English Teachers') teaching work is the primary vehicle through which they share the love of God with

their students, and also the strongest and clearest statement they make about what a Christian should be like." (Snow, 2001, p.65).

Susan Wong writes: "When Christian teachers diligently prepare for class, listen attentively to students, are genuinely concerned for their students' well-being, cooperate with colleagues (especially when wronged), and make an effort to continually learn and grow professionally, they are a witness." (Wong, 2009, p.99).

Zoltan Dornyei expresses it thus: "I myself really like the words attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: 'Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.'" (Dornyei, 2009: 156).

All these Christian educators see their role as not to 'convert' students to a religion, but to be a force for positive personal and social transformation. Suresh Canagarajah writes: "My faith finds an expression that is larger than one of merely preaching in the classroom or converting students. My pedagogical mission is the regeneration of everything in life – not just individuals, but social structures, environment, and knowledge paradigms. Furthermore, the way I do this is not by word but also by representing the regenerative values in my everyday classroom life." (Canagarajah, 2009, p.13).

And so it seems that one acceptable solution to the Christian teacher's dilemma is: Be a good teacher. Do an excellent job. Work hard to encourage and motivate students and cooperate with colleagues. This is perhaps the best way that one's faith in God can be expressed inside and outside the classroom. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men." (Colossians 3:23).

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