

Language Partners: The Church, Multiple Languages and ESL

Marlene E. Schmidt

LL&R Consulting, Language, Learning and Research Services
Santa Barbara, California, U.S.A.

Abstract

The lack of the diversity of languages in most churches, combined with the growing number of U.S. residents with a language other than English, points to a potential dilemma for local congregations about how to acknowledge and embrace the linguistic diversity already within the congregation. How should churches respond to speakers of other languages, especially those within their congregation? What should be the role and attitude of the church when dealing with this dilemma? This article examines the biblical and professional rationale for starting a language partnership ESL ministry as a solution. In addition, a discussion of the experience of one church provides suggestions of four principles necessary for successfully building a language partnership through ESL: have a vision, pedagogy is important, value the culture, and build relationships. It is hoped that the information discussed in this article will present an opportunity for further dialog in churches about a response to the growing linguistic diversity within their congregations.

Key words: ESL, language, multicultural church, multilingual church, partnership

Introduction

Historically, churches in the United States have been homogenous within ethnic boundaries and often greatly outnumber the number of multicultural churches (Garces-Foley, 2007). In 2010, a research partnership from Hartford Seminary conducted a survey of 25 different types of faith groups. The results from the randomly sampled survey showed the lack of connection with speakers of other languages in congregations across the United States (Cooperative Congregations Studies Partnership, 2011). Of the 11077 congregations surveyed, 91% did not have a service in a language other than English or a bilingual service (Cooperative Congregations Studies Partnership, 2011). In addition, 90% of the congregations reported no programs of any type for minorities or immigrants. A specific examination of the survey results from 3789 Evangelical Protestant congregations showed 92% did not have services in a language other than English or a bilingual service (Cooperative Congregations Studies Partnership, 2011). Although the results do not quantify how many of the congregations were in areas that had a language group other than English, the results from the 2010 study indicate an overall lack of language inclusiveness in congregations throughout the United States.

The lack of available ministries for languages other than English in churches today is taking place at the same time the numbers of speakers of other languages is increasing throughout communities in the United States. A report from the Center for Immigration Studies based on data from the 2014 American Community Survey estimated 63.2 million residents of the United States used a language other than English in the home (Zeigler & Camarota, 2015). Furthermore, 41% of those who speak another language in the home said that they speak English less than very well (Zeigler & Camarota, 2015). The Migration Policy Institute reports that 9% of the population of the United States is limited English proficient (LEP) (Zong & Batalova, 2015). This number grows much larger in states such as California where 19% of the population is LEP (Zong & Batalova, 2015). The number of immigrants to the United States has increased 11% between the year 2013 and 2014 (Zong & Batalova, 2016). The rise in immigration could have the potential implication of a sustained and significant increase in the number of LEP as well.

The lack of diversity in languages in most churches, combined with the growing number of U.S. residents with a language other than English, points to a potential problem for all churches. How should churches respond to the rapid increase in speakers of other languages, especially those within their congregation? Classes in English have been a common outreach to those in the neighborhood and local communities. Yet the question of how to acknowledge and embrace the linguistic diversity found already inside our church congregations has yet to be addressed. What should be the role of the church to deal with language diversity in ministries and how should it be achieved?

Biblical Background

An ESL ministry to the surrounding community has often been used as an outreach tool. According to recent research, an ESL ministry provided through churches has many benefits for the individual, the family and the community. Results from a study of church ESL programs show the benefits include a better appreciation for native language, better family literacy time, and more participation in community issues (Chao & Mantero, 2014). Additionally, the church ESL class becomes a place for gaining local knowledge and providing the support and valuing of the native language often lacking in non-church based programs (Chao & Mantero, 2014). The access to the larger community provided through an ESL class in a church benefits the entire

family with the multiple layers of support for immigrant adults and families provided through the class (Chao and Mantero, 2014). Furthermore, ESL classes at a church were shown to have a more nurturing environment, provide better opportunities to develop and practice higher language skills, and promote a valuing of prior knowledge and culture than the classes provided at a school (Ek, 2008). In contrast, Vafai (2014) found the training of students in an adult ESL school format was based on a business model where funding is the primary reason in every decision and instruction was centered on occupational readiness. This type of ESL instruction did not use lessons that resulted in a connection to learners or to the community and is ultimately likely to fail (Vafai, 2014).

It is clear there are worldly benefits of an ESL ministry in a church setting. However, churches must also consider if there is a biblical rationale as well. Although the Bible does not state “Thou shalt teach English,” there are numerous instructions about the need to consider others and promote unity among believers. In addition, the description of heaven presented in Revelation provides an example of what we should strive for in our churches.

Scripture provides evidence that we are to have unity among believers as one in Christ. An explanation of unity in Christ is found in Ephesians 2:19: “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” Commentary by Henry (1991) further explains that no one should feel like a stranger because Christ bought us through his sacrifice on the cross. Additionally, Christ builds together his holy temple through the diversity of believers (Henry, 1991, p. 2310). However there is more to the declaration that we should recognize others as part of the unity of Christ. There are admonitions to consider, encourage and meet together, such as found in Hebrews 10:24-25: “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” Although the passage does not explicitly state, “Teach English,” it does instruct us to consider one another. Piper describes the attitude of considering one another:

When you get up in the morning, “Consider – think about, ponder, deliberate, meditate, mull over – other people, with this conscious goal: what can I do today so that they will be stirred up to love and to good deeds? Now there is a reason to live and a focus for every day that will never be boring. Every day is new and different. People change. Their circumstances change. You change. But the call remains the same: consider, consider, consider these people you will be around today. (Piper, 1997, Consider What section, para 4)

As our communities become more diverse, the conscious goal to consider those around us should include being intentionally language inclusive in our churches. The instruction to encourage each other is an inclusionary one with no distinction of language mentioned. An intentionally language inclusive church puts in action the biblical instructions to encourage and consider each other to help build the unity of the body of Christ in our diversity.

Finally, the fact that our churches are homogenous does not accurately represent what is to come in heaven. Revelation 7:9 clearly describes a multicultural, multilingual heaven all giving worship to God at the same time: “After this I looked and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” This scripture gives us a picture of the multilingual, multicultural worship to come. It is the model of what we should strive for in our own churches.

Congregations are currently faced with a dilemma. If we are to have the attitude of considering others and value unity within the church, how do we embrace speakers of other languages within our congregation? One answer could be an ESL ministry to those within our congregations that promotes a language partnership rather than a separate but equal attitude. A language partnership provides greater glory of God through our working towards multicultural, multilingual unity and love. As Piper (2005) declares,

The ultimate goal of God in all of history is to uphold and display his glory for the enjoyment of the redeemed from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. The beauty of praise that will come to the Lord from the diversity of the nations is greater than the beauty that would come to him if the chorus of the redeemed were culturally uniform or limited. (p. 234)

Multilingual and Multicultural Churches

The terms multilingual and multicultural have incorrectly become synonymous and are often misapplied. For reasons of clarity this article will define multicultural churches as those with two or more distinct culture groups within the congregation. The term multilingual in the context of the discussion is defined as a church that has two or more languages spoken by its members. This is not meant to say members of the congregation are bilingual (a person who speaks two languages). Instead, in this context the term multilingual is the number of languages spoken within the church congregation as a whole. A church that is multicultural, with two or

more culture groups, may not necessarily be multilingual. For instance, a church congregation in the United States composed of African American and Caucasian members is multicultural yet both culture groups speak English (for the sake of this example); therefore that congregation would not be considered multilingual.

The dilemma of the role of churches in accommodating diversity in languages other than English does not have one solution that applies to every church. The purposeful development of multicultural churches that promote all languages is a solution that has been successful in some situations. The key to success in promoting the accommodation of multiple languages in ministry settings is the intentionality in building the church into one multicultural body. Garces-Foley (2007) defines the multicultural church as one that blends multiple cultures together into a whole new social institution, instead of being two cultures coexisting inside one building. “What is most noteworthy about the multicultural church is not the mere presence of diversity within its walls, but the interaction between those inside” (Garces-Foley, 2007, p. 212). Unfortunately the interaction within the members is not an assured result even with a church that intentionally builds a multicultural congregation. However, there are examples of churches that have been successful at accommodating the multicultural and multilingual needs found within.

There are 6.8 million Canadians, approximately 20.6% of the population of Canada, speaking a heritage language other than English or French (Statistics Canada, 2012). A case study examination of a Canadian congregation provides an interesting example of multiculturalism and multilingualism within a church setting in a country with a large population of speakers of languages other than English. The church, located in Toronto, Canada, started as a church plant for Mandarin immigrants from China and later added an English speaking service as an evangelistic outreach for local Canadians and refugees from other areas that knew English (Han, 2011). It is interesting to note that this church started with the primary language of Chinese and added English, not the other way around. The church has language policies in place to encourage speakers in both languages, two separate services in Mandarin and English, discipleship classes in both languages, and it shares administrative activities (Han, 2011). An example of the language policies is the practice of designating one language to be spoken at the time of an event while at the same time encouraging communication in every language for individuals (Han, 2011). The feeling of social inclusion is encouraged through the promotion of all languages and is evidenced by the willingness of leaders to learn vocabulary and phrases in

other predominant languages (Han, 2011). The intentional promotion of all languages in this church is considered an extension of the evangelistic goal to reach all people, and is not intended to promote diversity for the sake of being a diverse church.

The goal of building a multilingual church, as Han (2011) described, is not an easy process. There are many churches that begin with an ESL program as an outreach program for those in the community. However, the starting point for congregations that are already multilingual could be the development of an ESL ministry as a language partnership for those within the church congregation. A language partnership ESL ministry is one that encourages relationships as well as giving language instruction.

Starting a Church ESL Ministry

There are two considerations that should be examined when developing any ESL ministry for those within the church. First, the resistance within the church body to becoming a multicultural and multilingual church can be one of the most serious challenges (Garces-Foley, 2007). The resistance to change, the lack of desire to change in order to become one church, and the unwillingness and discomfort of members in the process of becoming a multicultural church are serious challenges that must be overcome (Garces-Foley, 2007). Additional challenges include the language policies and social inclusion in a church setting (Han, 2011).

Secondly, an ESL program within the church has many issues to consider. The quality of teachers, varying literacy levels of students, and funding are the most common challenges mentioned in literature (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2008; Eyring, 2014). It should be noted that the lack of funds and lack of willing volunteers are common issues in starting any new church ministry.

The challenge of finding high quality teachers directly applies to adult ESL classes offered in a church setting. The ESL classes in a church setting are usually considered a ministry and therefore the teachers are predominately volunteers. The challenge is when volunteers have the heart but not the skill for teaching ESL. While it is important to have a heart for this type of ministry, it is equally as important to have the knowledge of pedagogy and best practices. Indeed, a wide discrepancy exists in the opinion of what is required of volunteers for effective teaching of English. The North American Mission Board (2014) suggests that churches interested in starting a literacy ministry require volunteers to attend a short one-day workshop to

cover the basics of instruction, outreach, and administration of literacy classes. In contrast, Dormer (2011) considers a lengthier list of skills that are necessary for effective teaching of language and should include communicative competence, linguistic knowledge, theoretical knowledge and methodological competence.

There are a plethora of available resources with advice for starting ESL outreach classes in a church setting. The North American Missions Board (2014) lists several basic tasks and methods to begin a church based ESL ministry. Heineke, Coleman, Ferrell, and Kersemeier (2012) discuss the steps necessary for a school to become more responsive to languages. Dormer (2011) makes recommendations on how to start a teaching ministry in a missions setting. However, finding suggestions on how to use an ESL class to encourage language partnership within the congregation is more difficult.

Language Partnerships

The experience of one church in California can provide an example of practices used to develop a language partnership through the use of an ESL ministry for those within their congregation. The example is meant to be a reflection of the practices of a particular situation and not a detailed case study. It is hoped that this reflection can be an opportunity to prompt a discussion in the local church on starting their own ESL ministry for those within their own congregation.

CBC¹ is a church in a medium size coastal California community with members from many different nationalities and languages. It is an established church that has historically been interested in serving the multiculturalism within the church body and the local neighborhood. CBC has developed and maintained a ministry for Spanish speakers as a separate congregation using the CBC church facilities for 17 years. Recently, CBC has begun moving away from being two congregations in one building to an inclusive multicultural, multilingual church body. This move towards inclusiveness has resulted in a church of one body with two languages sharing in the ministries, budgets, activities and lives of all members. On Sunday mornings there is an English service and a Spanish service with joint ministry for children and teens. There is a joint discipleship hour with classes available for adults in English and in Spanish. Once a quarter there is a joint bilingual service to include all members of the congregation.

¹ CBC is a pseudonym for a church where the author is a member.

The recent move to inclusiveness in all areas of CBC has highlighted the need for all church members to feel a part of one church. The time between service and discipleship hour clearly showed the lack of comfortable fellowship expected of members of one body. The English speakers did not feel capable of communicating in Spanish and the Spanish speakers felt uncomfortable speaking in English. In order to promote fellowship within the body an English class was proposed as the method to build relationships and partnerships. The ESL ministry is overseen by a member of the congregation and is staffed with one teacher and two assistants. The class meets once a week and is offered to the members and visitors in either service. Friends and neighbors are welcomed although they are not actively recruited since the main focus is to serve the members of the congregation. The following is a reflection on the experiences and best practices from the development of the ESL ministry at CBC.

Principles for Church Language Partnerships

The experience of CBC in developing its ESL ministry resulted in four principles discussed briefly below: have a vision, pedagogy is important, value the culture, and build relationships.

Have a Vision

It is crucial to draft and cultivate a vision and mission statement for incorporating linguistic diversity (Heineke, et al., 2012). The idea for the ESL ministry developed from discussions between a ministry leader and the Pastors of the church. The original vision of the CBC ESL class was to promote comfortable fellowship that would spread into the greater congregation. The idea was to build a bridge between the two languages with the goal to develop and encourage relationships based on being one body in Christ. The English class provided the method to begin the process of building relationships. The emphasis of the class was to encourage and help those with a desire to learn and converse in English while providing a place to begin friendships and communication with each other. Any decisions about class structure, lessons, curriculum and pedagogy were made with this primary goal in mind. The vision and focus on building relationships resulted in classes that were more informal and had an emphasis on partner lessons, games and activities.

Pedagogy is Important

A crucial component of an English ministry is having theoretical knowledge and methodological competence (Dormer, 2011). The CBC ESL class was developed using a sociocultural framework of learning. The sociocultural framework of learning a language integrates the aspects of cognitive learning and social identity and is focused on the social aspect of language and the context or language as it is used (Vygotsky & Kozulin, 2011). Learning is described as a focus on communication within social and cultural contexts and occurs when new levels of knowledge are reached through the help of those with mastery of the task (Dixon, Zhao, Shin, Wu, Su, Burgess-Brigham, Gezer, & Snow, 2012). The idea of a sociocultural framework fit within the CBC vision of creating comfortable fellowship within a multilingual church. The class does not operate as a formal ESL class with grades, tests, or semesters. Instead of focusing solely on instruction, the majority of the time is spent on individual instruction with volunteer tutors using books for reading, a vocabulary curriculum, or curriculum the students have brought from home. The framework of sociocultural learning is utilized during class by having the volunteers and students with greater English mastery help the students with limited proficiency.

Value the Culture

The dynamics of multiple cultures within one church can present many challenges. In order to overcome challenges the negotiation of each culture is important, recognizing language needs, advocating for bilingual members and not causing harm due to a lack of sensitivity to the culture (Dormer, 2011; Heineke, et al., 2012). Several cultural challenges of the CBC ESL class included the cultural view of being on time, the difference in economic status, and awareness of limited resources. The ability to use electronic resources was impacted by the economic status of the students. Although all the students had phones, it was found that the amount of data available for use was severely limited due to the cost. In addition, many of the students did not own a computer, or the one available computer was for their school age children. The solution was to design the class to be flexible, integrate curriculum that did not use technology the students did not have, and only use books that were free or very inexpensive. The focus and importance was placed on the students being able to come without disrupting their family obligations and budget.

Build Relationships

There are multiple resources that suggest building relationships can lead toward

successful language learning (Dormer, 2011; Heineke, et al., 2012; Sobel & Kugler, 2007). Relationship building at CBC was primarily established through the help of volunteers. The question of proper training and pedagogy was mediated with specific training for the volunteers. At CBC, the director of the ESL ministry is an experienced teacher and before a new volunteer begins they are given instruction on specific methods to help English language learners in conversation and reading. The volunteers are encouraged to be a part of the classroom both as a participant and as a part of the leadership team. Volunteers contribute an essential element of the personal caring and sharing in the class that is necessary for building relationships.

Conclusion

The results of the ESL ministry can be measured in the relationships and attitudes that have improved. The students feel pleased and grateful to have someone take an interest in their needs. One student said, “I thank you for you. You make us feel more better.” An Elder of the church commented on whether the ESL ministry has shown a benefit to the church saying, “It has helped. It helps bind the members of our congregation with different languages closer together as well as making them more comfortable interacting with each other. I would like to see this ministry grow so that language continues to decrease as a barrier to our congregation.” Although fellowship has increased, the greater result is the awareness of each other as a part of one church. An indirect result of having the language partnership ESL ministry is an increase in new people attending the church because of the emphasis on intentionally striving for linguistic diversity.

While the development of a language partnership at CBC has shown positive results, there is still more to be done. A multilingual church should value each of the languages spoken within the congregation. It follows to reason that a multilingual congregation should consider offering classes in the predominant languages spoken other than English. Plans are currently being made to offer a Spanish class at CBC to those within the English-speaking congregation. It is an important part of the strategy to demonstrate the value of all languages within the community.

The rise in the number of speakers of other languages and the current lack of churches that demonstrate the unity and love for those with linguistic diversity points to a dilemma for congregations. The issue of how to embrace and encourage the diversity of language within the

local church, either through an ESL class or another approach, is an important discussion for the unity of the body. The goal should ultimately be the realization that different languages provide a positive contribution and example of the unity found in Christ.

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Dr. Marlene E. Schmidt (doctormschmidt@gmail.com) teaches English in a variety of settings with students ranging from low-income individuals to company executives. Her research interests include cross-cultural kids, ESL ministry, and teacher education. A sign in her kitchen warns, “I am silently correcting your grammar.”

