



Foreign/Second Language: Languages and Hospitality

What if a foreign language class were about hospitality to strangers?

David taught modern languages at the high school level and was looking for ways to connect language learning with moral and spiritual development.

“I wanted my students to begin to think of language study in terms of learning to extend hospitality to strangers and loving people who are from other cultures. For that reason, I wanted my students to encounter people from the target culture who had something to teach us. Too many of the people represented in my textbook were either cartoon characters or stock photos, and offered little opportunity to develop empathy or receive personal challenges.

“In my German class I began to work with the story of the White Rose, a group of Christian students who resisted the Nazi regime in World War II. I started the class with a single black-and-white photo on the screen, showing three of the students gathered together outdoors, looking very grim. (The photograph is widely available online, for example at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:WhiteRose.jpg>.) There are some other people at the edges of the photo and in the background. I began to ask simple questions in German: ‘What do you see? How many people are there? How old are they? Where are they? How are they feeling?’, and so on.

“One great feature of this photo is that not all of its details strike the eye immediately. When I asked how many people there were, students often said three or four at first, then started revising their guesses. It is possible to count six. Using this question at the beginning invited students to be more attentive and really focus on what was going on.

“Using more questions and more photos, I gradually told the story of how and why these students chose to resist the Nazi regime, and how they were eventually caught and executed (the recent film *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* is a good resource); but still expressed a great deal of hope and courage in the face of death. We did reading, listening, and writing activities connected with the story. My students got very involved in what happened to the German students, and when we were done, I could honestly say to them that we had been practicing welcoming strangers into our lives—hearing their

stories and learning from them. We discussed what we might have done in their situation and where we would have drawn hope from.”

What's going on here?

David saw his language lesson as a place to emphasize and practice love for others; and in particular, hospitality to strangers. He also saw this process as involving a need to practice reflective attentiveness, not just a matter of transferring information.

He engaged students experientially through the introductory image and questions, which focused their attention on learning from others. He also used storytelling as a way of helping students make personal connections, and used the discussion to encourage grappling with big questions.

He reshaped his practice by planning an evocative introduction and using a key image to set the tone objects, by reframing learning in terms of the framing concept of hospitality, and by using storytelling and a planned series of questions to help students connect their learning to their own choices and the wider world.

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

David approached his class with an intentional focus on how language learning could be about learning to love and learn from others. Christian faith includes an emphasis not only on loving one’s neighbor but also on loving strangers, those who are different from us. This lesson also included an emphasis on the role faith played in the lives and decisions of the German students and how it gave them hope in desperate circumstances.

What difference does it make?

Language learning can sometimes end up with the main focus on teachers getting to say what they want to say, or learning how to obtain services overseas. This lesson shifted

the focus to listening to others' stories; in this case, a story that contained spiritual and moral challenges that could stimulate students to serious reflection.

Where could we go from here?

A range of other stories can be used in the foreign language classroom to create an emphasis on welcoming and learning from others; both historical stories told through word and image. and if available, stories from local people who can be invited to visit the class.

Digging deeper

The Bible teaches that we should love both neighbors and strangers as ourselves ([Leviticus 19:18](#), [Leviticus 19:33-34](#)), and calls us to exercise hospitality toward strangers ([Matthew 25:34-35](#), [Hebrews 13:2](#)).

Loving attention starts with humility. This is the attitude that others deserve to be heard. ([Philippians 2:3](#)). The Bible describes the world as God's and people as his creation. In some way, people reflect a little of God; this gives them an inherent worth. It is not up to us to assign worth to some people but withhold it from others. ([Genesis 1:27](#)). If we value others, we give their lives, ideas, and what they produce careful attention.

The first duty of love is to listen. Paul Tillich

Humility is essential if we are to learn from others. It is not groveling self-abasement, but it is the opposite of pride and arrogance. It is not being untruthful about our abilities. True humility is a generous attitude of mind that values others and sees oneself realistically. Jesus modeled humility throughout his life. Differences in culture, age, or material wealth are not be seen as grounds for pride.



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