



Foreign/Second Language: Words and Care

Word and What if the choice of words in a language class taught caring for others?

Cynthia taught Spanish at the elementary school level. She began to wonder about how the choice of what phrases to learn and how they were sequenced sent messages about how we should treat one another.

"I realized that I had been in the habit of teaching the phrase 'I am sorry' in Spanish so that students could apologize if they were rude to each other, had not finished an assignment, or were late for class; but I had not been teaching them how to say, 'I forgive you.' That meant the students were apologizing every now and then, but not hearing that they were forgiven. They were not being encouraged to forgive one another and extend grace to one another. I started making sure that 'I am sorry' and 'I forgive you' went together in our speaking to each other.

"That started me thinking about other aspects of what we did. For instance, I noticed that when we practiced talking about illness ('I have a headache' or 'I have a cold') and then had mastered those phrases through games and exercises, we moved on to the next topic. But a better response to hearing someone say they are not feeling well is to express sympathy or offer to do something to help. So I added some phrases such as 'I'm sorry, I hope you feel better soon,' 'I'll get you a glass of water,' and 'I'll pray for you.' I used role play to practice theses in connection with the illness phrases. This gave me an opportunity to talk briefly with the students about how they respond outside of class to finding out that someone else is not feeling well.

"After this, I went looking for other places in my lesson plans where something that we learned how to say should be followed by a caring or encouraging response, rather than moving on to the next item of vocabulary."

What's going on here?

Cynthia saw the conversations in her foreign language class as opportunities for her students to experience grace, forgiveness, and encouragement.

She engaged students in actively attending to others' needs through their words and actions and in reflecting on what responses express care for others.

She reshaped her practice by changing the sequence of words and phrases in her lessons to provide a new framework for interacting together and to create a particular ethos. This offered concrete ways of expressing care.

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

At the heart of Christian faith is an emphasis on how we receive grace (undeserved love) from God, and then how to approach others with grace and forgiveness. As a result, we are to approach the needs and weaknesses of others with love and encouragement, aware that we share the same vulnerability; we also need gracious help from God and from those around us.

What difference does it make?

The ways that we use words with one another say a lot about how we view each other and what kind of community we see ourselves living in. In this classroom, a fairly small set of changes in the choice and sequence of words practiced made a big difference to the ethos that was being created because the underlying patterns of how students spoke to each other were adjusted to focus on care.

Digging deeper

A University of Pittsburgh study of 680 women with chest pain found those who harbored feelings of anger were four times more likely to have unhealthy cholesterol levels and a higher body mass index, both of which are linked to heart disease. Forgiveness is good for our health.

Forgiving others is one of the most difficult aspects of Christian practice. It is not surprising that the poet Alexander Pope said, “To err is human; to forgive, divine.” Forgiveness means ceasing to feel resentment toward an enemy, but that does not mean that evil is allowed to continue; sometimes justice and making amends still need to happen. Forgiveness is often the first step toward reconciliation in a relationship. For Christians, forgiveness is a response to being forgiven by God; it was modeled by Christ, who forgave his enemies ([Luke 23:24](#)) and offers forgiveness to all who come to him. Asking God for forgiveness should result in our forgiveness of others ([Matthew 6:14-15](#); [Colossians 3:13](#)). Forgiveness is not just a feeling; it can be an act of will.

Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. Corrie Ten Boom

Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive. C. S. Lewis

In the Bible, God is shown as being slow to anger but quick to forgive, since mercy is central to his character ([Micah 7:18](#)). Various word pictures are used for forgiveness in the Bible. [Psalm 103:12](#) talks about God putting our sins as far away as the east is from the west. [Isaiah 1:18](#) compares forgiveness to removing a stain. One of the New Testament words for forgiveness means canceling a debt.

God is called “the God of all encouragement” ([2 Corinthians 1:3-4](#)). The Apostle Paul calls people to [encourage each other](#) and build each other up ([1 Thessalonians 5:11](#)). Encouragement means [focusing on others](#) and being unselfish in praise. Often, what people do and who they are go unnoticed; people who exercise a ministry of encouragement make a point of noticing. Barnabas in the New Testament was called “the son of encouragement” ([Acts 4:36](#); [Acts 11:23](#)), since he encouraged others.



Previous: Serving through Words
What if learning Spanish were abo...

Next: Languages and Hospitality
What if a foreign language class we...



