



Foreign/Second Language:

Grammar and Giving

What if a grammar lesson challenged selfishness?

Steven teaches modern foreign languages in a college and was concerned that language learning tends to revolve around self.

“There comes a point in my foreign language courses when I teach the subjunctive—sentences on the pattern of ‘What would you do if...?’ I wanted to find a way of practicing this that challenged students to discipline their imaginations. I decided to use the following activity. I displayed questions one at a time at the front of the classroom, and had students discuss their answers in pairs. After each pair discussion, I asked for a few answers from the whole class. This gave us plenty of practice with the ‘I would...if...’ sentences, and set us up for the next step. Here are the questions:

- If I gave you \$50,000 to buy anything you wanted, what would you buy?
- If I gave you \$50,000 for you to give away, to whom would you give it?
- If you had a week completely free, how would you spend it?
- If you could give a week to serving someone, who would you serve?
- If you could have a free vacation anywhere in the world, where would it be?
- If you could change things for the better anywhere in the world, where would you go?

“Once we discussed all of the questions, I asked students to reflect for a few moments on which of the questions they found easiest to think of answers for, and which ones were the hardest. They usually werewilling to admit what was already clear from the volume level of the discussions. The questions involving spending money and getting free time usually produced immediate discussion, whereas the giving and serving questions usually led to more hesitant, subdued conversations. Then we took a few minutes to talk about why it was easier to imagine spending than giving, and about how our culture encourages

us (through constant advertising) to imagine spending and having new experiences more often than it encourages us to imagine giving and serving. I asked them to think about how it might change them if they deliberately chose to fantasize about giving and serving, at least as often as they fantasized about buying and receiving.”

What's going on here?

Steven saw language learning as an appropriate context to change the focus from self to others and from consumption to giving and service.

He engaged students in approaching the lesson within a new framework (from imagining getting to imagining giving) and in discussing both getting and giving in order to enable a comparison.

He reshaped his practice by using an intentional arrangement of questions and answers to stimulate moral and spiritual reflection (why are some of these questions easier?), and by using volume of discussion as a tangible indicator of how easy it was to engage.

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

Many Christian writers have described love in its Christian sense as a movement out from self-centeredness toward a focus on the well-being of one's neighbor. The basic command, “Love your neighbour as yourself”, sums this up. This focus on living a life centered on love challenges our tendency to spend more energy imagining improvements to our own well-being and enjoyment than we do imagining how we could serve those around us. The activity also implicitly addresses hope: What hopes for our future are expressed in our daydreaming? How do these hopes include our neighbor?

What difference does it make?

All too often, language learning ends up revolving around the self and the satisfaction of consumer needs. Students learn to buy things in another language, secure services they might need while abroad, and talk about what they like and dislike. All of these things

have their place, but when they make up the dominant repertoire of the language classroom, they invite learners to imagine that language learning is mostly about serving one's own needs and desires. This activity changes the repertoire so as to actively ask students to imagine others' needs and the role they could play in meeting them. It also asks students to reflect on how their imagination has been formed, giving them a chance to question whether consumerist emphases overly dominate their thinking.

Where could we go from here?

A next step might be to have each student reflect further on one of the neighbor-oriented questions, and produce a short piece of writing in the target language describing exactly how they would give or serve, and why. Another follow-up could involve having students speak or write about what they could do (this practices another subjunctive verb) with their actual present resources that would practice giving and serving. There are other parts of the language curriculum where a focus on self and on others can be explored. Do students learn to complain at the hotel, for example, but not to encourage or compliment? Do they only talk about what foods or school subjects they themselves like or dislike, or do they learn about others' perspectives?

Digging deeper

Jesus talked of loving others as we love ourselves (Mark 12:30-31). Choosing to be unselfish is to go against the grain and it is an act of faith: If I don't look after "Number One," will God? Will others? Jesus talked in terms of dying to self, which is something that happens with the help of the Holy Spirit. This is not a one-time act, but a daily process. Self is not lost in the process, it is strengthened. There is a strange inversion; in focusing on God and others, we find ourselves (Matthew 16:25). In 1 Corinthians love is described as "not self-seeking." This does not mean self is effaced or personal needs are not met. We can uphold the dignity of people (including ourselves) and their entitlement to be treated as God's children. Security in the love of God means that self and others do not have to be in competition. There is enough of God's love to go around. Jesus is the ultimate example of a love that is big enough for everyone (Romans 5:8).

"For Augustine, sin was no more than self-love: sin consisted in valuing oneself over others and conceiving of others and of God in terms of one's

own self.... It was to measure others in reference to oneself, to enter into social relations out of self-interest. Worship was the counteraction of self-love. The worship of God was the movement of the soul, from self-love, self-orientation, to God and outward to others: honouring them, according humanity equal value to oneself, and according God greater value than oneself." Lee Palmer Wandel, Zwingli and Reformed Practice, p. 286.



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