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Editorial: A Turn to the Theological in Christian TESOL?

Bradley Baurain

When we invited Zoltán Dörnyei to be the plenary speaker earlier this year at the Christians in English Language Teaching (CELT 2018) Conference in Chicago, I expected his topic to be something on motivation, psychology, or group dynamics. He is, after all, a well-known and widely-published expert in these areas. Instead, he proposed “Vision, Mental Imagery and the Christian Life,” a topic that wove together theology, the social sciences, ministry, and teaching. During his talk, we were held spellbound.

In recent years, there appears to have been a welcome turn to the theological in Christian TESOL, that is, in both publications and conference presentations more attention is being given to deepening the theological foundations of what we do. Values such as service, love, and professional excellence have over the years been well promoted and explored, but there is a need for more. We often say, “There is no such thing as a Christian teaching method,” but at times this tends to derail us from thinking about other possible distinctives. If God created us to learn, and if he created the world about which we learn (including language), then it stands to reason that Christian researchers and practitioners will see many issues differently compared to those with other worldviews. These differences may not be appreciated by the TESOL mainstream, but they need to be developed within our own professional community, otherwise we risk merely putting a light Christian frosting on what is essentially a secular cake. At the very least, if TESOL is to be a ministry that serves the global church – for example, in the area of English for Bible and Theology (EBT) – the work of developing a more robust theology for our discipline must continue.

Now might be a good time for this refocusing, in that TESOL in general seems largely uninterested in spiritual and religious issues. Bill Johnston’s (2017) *English Teaching and Evangelical Mission: The Case of Lighthouse School*, for example – reviewed by Mary Shepard Wong in the previous volume (No. 4) of this journal – surely the most in-depth research to date in this area, has attracted slight attention and sparked little response outside of evangelical circles. One hopes the forthcoming *Spirituality in English Language Teaching*, edited by Mary Shepard Wong and Ahmar Mahboob (2018), will be more widely read and discussed.

A prime example of the turn to the theological is *Thinking Theologically about Language Teaching*, edited by Cheri Pierson and Will Bankston (2017). [Full disclosure: I contributed a chapter.] Other good examples include work by Dormer and Woelk (2018), Hibbs (2017), Pasquale and Bierma (2011), and the ongoing work at the What If Learning website (<http://www.whatiflearning.com/>).

In This Issue

The fifth volume of this journal also reflects this turn to the theological, particularly in its two main articles. First, Don Snow has contributed a slightly edited version of his plenary address at the 2017 Christians in English Language Teaching (CELT) Conference in Seattle. Entitled “Vocation in the Ivory Tower: A Personal Reflection on Christian Service and Secular Academics,” it non-prescriptively explores the place of research within a teacher’s ministry.

Second, Michael Lessard-Clouston has written an article entitled “Reflections on Incorporating Virtues in an Intercultural Communication for Teachers Course.” Although I did not cite him above, he has also been very much a part of the trend toward more in-depth theological thinking in our field (see, for example, Lessard-Clouston 2012, 2017).

In addition to these two excellent articles, there are five books reviewed in this issue of the journal:

- *Teach Like a Disciple: Exploring Jesus’ Instructive Relationships from an Educational Perspective*, by Jillian Nerhus Lederhouse. (Reviewed by Polly Treviño)
- *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*, by Marilyn Chandler McEntyre. (Reviewed by Emanuel Padilla)
- *Dangerous Territory: My Misguided Quest to Save the World*, by Amy Peterson. (Reviewed by Dani Shepard)
- *Reflecting on Critical Incidents in Language Education: 40 Dilemmas for Novice TESOL Professionals*, by Thomas S. C. Farrell and Laura Baecher. (Reviewed by Marilyn Lewis)
- *Resilience: Bouncing Back through English*, by R. Michael Medley. (Reviewed by Robin Gingerich)

This is the first volume of the journal that I have co-edited, and I am definitely still learning the ropes. I am grateful not only to my co-editor, Michael Pasquale, but also to the previous, founding editor, Michael Lessard-Clouston, who has been invaluable in helping shepherd this issue to actual publication. As we look to the future, some of the issues we are

considering include how to attract additional high-quality submissions, a new Internet home, and the possibility of advance online publication of forthcoming content. We welcome your input to these discussions, as well as your submissions! In the meantime, read and enjoy.

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