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Rachael Sloan Tsaneva

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## **Reflections on Church-Based English Ministry**

**Rachael Sloan Tsaneva**

Institute for Cross-Cultural Training  
Wheaton, Illinois, U.S.A.

### **Abstract**

This article provides a reflection on lessons learned in directing a church-based ESL program in the United States. The author reflects on stories of God’s provision, the importance of preparing and teaching well, the deeply relational aspects of this ministry, the integration of the Body of Christ, and the importance of encouraging and supporting volunteers in these programs. Special consideration is given to the scope and purpose of church-based English programs and the ways that TESOL professionals can support volunteer teachers in this work.

**Key words:** church-based ministry, church-sponsored ESL, community-based ESOL

### **Introduction**

After several years of experience in TESOL teaching and teacher training, in the fall of 2021, I stepped into the role of directing a church-based English program in Virginia. Although I have loved directing this program, I am now preparing to transition this role to someone else, which is a perfect point for me to step back for a moment and assess what I have learned. These reflections on what I believe about TESOL ministry can certainly also apply more broadly to Christian TESOL professionals of all kinds, and indeed, I have seen these principles also apply when teaching in secular contexts. As I have reflected, it has seemed fitting to me for each reflection to be summarized with a key verse. I pray that each principle and story is an encouragement to my colleagues.

### **We are richly supplied with all that we need.**

*And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.*  
Philippians 4:19 (ESV)

As I have consulted with multiple church-based English programs over the last few years, I have encountered a variety of approaches by church leaders to these programs. Some wholeheartedly embrace the program and are able to invest significant funds and even paid staff into the ministry, while others are less involved and may or may not have funding to contribute. Our program has been blessed to not only have the financial support of the host church, but also

to have received multiple financial gifts from several other churches, some of whom are not even in the same denomination, to help fund this program. I recognize that it is a rare occurrence for churches to give financial gifts to other churches for their ministry, and I praise God for his provision in this way!

Beyond finances, the Lord who calls his people from every walk of life has also called volunteers from every background to serve with us. One volunteer, who drives a few of our students to and from class each week, is also an optometrist. When one of my teachers mentioned that two of the students were having trouble reading their textbooks, I contacted this doctor and asked if he would be willing to help, thinking he might have suggestions about getting them low-cost glasses. He went a step further, providing free and complete eye exams to each of them. His office even had a staff member who spoke a language in common with those two students! It was a privilege to go with one of the students, who, as a refugee, said she had never had an eye exam, and see the love of Christ shown in this way.

God has provided us with volunteer teachers who work in many fields: education, speech-language pathology, Christian ministry, finance, electrical infrastructure, accounting, homemaking, and more. Their rich experiences and backgrounds have grown and deepened connections with our students, who are touched when they understand that their teachers are volunteering their time out of love.

Furthermore, we have volunteer childcare workers and drivers who give of their time (and gas money) to help our students have access to class, overcoming the barriers of childcare and transportation that are ever-present in our community, especially for our international neighbors. I've seen God continue to richly supply all of our needs, just as he has supplied me with wisdom in learning how to bring together a diverse group of people. This is truly a picture of the Body of Christ.

One other need of English programs has been supplied, as well—the students! When we restarted classes after COVID, we were unsure how many students we might have and where they would come from. We walked through three neighborhoods where many of our former students lived, handing out multilingual flyers and inviting residents to attend. Some students had attended the church's English classes in the past, and our seasoned volunteers invited them back again, continuing years-long relationships. Others saw our banner on the street and simply walked in. Some heard about us through the grapevine, and we still aren't exactly sure how they

knew to come. Still others came from other community contacts, and one couple even joined us because a local man, who had been going door-to-door to meet internationals in their apartment complex, invited them! As is common in these programs, we have students who come and go, but we are thankful for the ones that God sends, no matter how long we get to know them.

Ultimately, “the Spirit of God supplies the resources of ministry in the church” (Gallagher, 2017, p. 141). Whether those resources are time, funds, volunteers, or students, the Holy Spirit is at work in ways we cannot even imagine.

### **We are called to do our work well, as unto the Lord.**

*Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. Colossians 3:23–24*

As an English ministry trainer and consultant, one of the values closest to my heart is to help English ministry workers do their work well. This does not mean that I require all of my workers to have MAs in TESOL or to write elaborate lesson plans. For our purposes, with only 90 minutes of class one night per week, simple is best. We know that our students will not make great leaps in proficiency at that rate; this is an unattainable goal without additional help. What can happen, however, is this:

- Students can grow in confidence as they practice their English in a safe, loving environment.
- Students can gain skills in learning that they can apply outside of the classroom.
- Students can join a community that welcomes them in, feeling a sense of belonging, and be connected to others through this network of friends.

It is crucial that our teachers plan and teach well so that the students can feel this sense of welcome and safety in our program. Nearly all of our teachers have participated in a weekend intensive workshop to learn the basics of church-based TESOL ministry, and some have also worked with me individually for further help with lesson planning. Furthermore, our beginning and intermediate learners are taught using professionally-written curriculum, ensuring that they learn in a realistic progression. Although the program previously used a more academic curriculum, we changed this year to use Intercambio, which is written for adult immigrant and refugee students in the US and is much more applicable in terms of life skills and everyday needs than many other curriculum options, which are written for college-level programs. Our advanced learners study topics that relate to their lives, needs, and interests, helping them to acclimate to

culture and customs in the United States. We try to give our students as many opportunities as we can to speak English meaningfully with one another.

All of these factors, from teacher training to curriculum choice to classroom activities, are intended to provide the best education that we can offer in this setting. Snow (2001) exhorts Christian English teachers that they

should view the quality of their teaching work as the primary means through which they bear witness to God and share his love with students. One reason for this line of reasoning is that, from the perspective of a student of English, the most immediate and pressing need is for assistance in learning English. The best way to demonstrate love to such students is by offering them the help that they need and call for. The diligence with which Christian English teachers offer this assistance thus becomes a visible and credible measure of their level of concern for students. (Chapter 4, "Christian Witness in the Classroom," para. 2)

Thus, offering classes that are welcoming and provide the instruction our students need is vital in sharing Christ's love with them.

Even in our devotional times, we seek to do things well. As a program meeting in a church, we are open about the fact that we are Christians, while at the same time we welcome students of all religious backgrounds, and we are thankful that so many students of different religious backgrounds do, indeed, join us each week. However, to avoid anyone feeling as if there has been a bait-and-switch, the devotional time in each class is only about five minutes long and is entirely optional. The teachers are provided with a simple English explanation and pictures to help explain each verse. Ultimately, we want our students to know Christ, but we know that only he can move in their hearts, and it is our role to love them well, plant the seeds, and allow God to work in whatever way he wills. We know the Holy Spirit is the greatest teacher, so we pray for his work in moving our students' hearts to come to know him and his help in each aspect of our teaching and our students' learning (Gallagher, 2017).

### **Relationships are the key to success.**

*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 1 Corinthians 13:1*

Each time a new person or family walks into the church for English class, we learn a new story. Our students have come from several continents, many as refugees, with no one prevailing ethnic or linguistic background represented in the program, creating both a beautiful tapestry and

a heartwrenching web of stories. One student lost both of her aging parents this year within the span of a few months, but was unable to return to her home country to say goodbye. We sent cards and checked in on her, sharing in her grief. Another student, who is always faithful to attend class, missed one evening, and when we checked on her, we learned that she had driven across the state with her family for her naturalization interview. When she returned, we presented her with flowers and cheered together at one of our newest Americans.

Another student had been asking for help studying for her naturalization exam. She shared that she'd taken the exam before, but was failed on a technicality, so she needed to reapply and be reexamined, costing hundreds of dollars more for her family. I promised that we'd be praying for her, and she was visibly moved. A few weeks later, she came into the church and immediately asked for prayer, since her husband was sending her application off the next day. Another teacher and I prayed with her and two of her daughters. I'm not sure who was more moved—the student, who felt so loved, or the teacher and me, as we prayed with a woman in a hijab in the church lobby!

Yet another student, a young African refugee, came to us declaring that she wanted to become a nurse. I knew that a local nonprofit offered free nursing training to those who qualified, and was able to take her to learn about the program. God even provided a staff person there who spoke French and could help the student understand! Although her English level is not yet where it needs to be for her to study nursing, it was helpful to give her hope and an avenue to follow when she is ready.

A Pakistani couple started attending classes in fall 2021 and attended for just three weeks. Though we were disappointed, this is a normal experience in church programs, as students have shifting work schedules, family responsibilities, and priorities. However, in March 2022, the couple returned to class. On their first night back, the wife exclaimed, “We have missed you all so much!” I was touched and humbled that they felt so deeply connected after all that time away, and even more so as they continued to return, week after week.

As we welcome our students in, we fulfill Christ's command to welcome the stranger (Matthew 25:35). Smith (2018) also writes of the difference in our motivation in language learning when we view it through the lens of hospitality to strangers and loving our neighbors, encouraging us to “learn how to open a hospitable space in ourselves toward linguistic and

cultural others” (p. 68). We are no longer just providing information, but welcoming them in to a community where they can belong.

One way we show hospitality and honor our students’ backgrounds is by making sure that they can access God’s word in their heart languages. During our five-minute devotional time, each student has the opportunity to read the verse being studied in his or her heart language(s). One of our students is a native Kirundi speaker, and, though I searched a number of online resources, I was unable to find access to the Old Testament in Kirundi from which I could reliably pull verses when we had a verse from the Psalms in the devotional time. This student kept asking for the verse in her language, and I even reached out to some friends who were missionaries in different parts of Africa, asking for help and contacts, but to no avail. Then, one day, I was talking with the student’s daughter, who told me that Kinyarwanda is mutually intelligible with Kirundi. I was so excited to be able to find the right verses in that language and to give them to this student so that she, too, could be included, and the student felt honored that we had found a language that she could access. Each time that we add new students (which can be any time, as we have rolling enrollment), we make it a priority to add their languages to the multilingual devotional handout, showing them that we know and value them and that God is the God of all languages, peoples, and nations.

Thursday nights are not only time for English class at the church. The worship band also has practice at the same time. Many of our students, Christian and non-Christian, have been attracted to the beautiful, live music, and will go into the sanctuary to listen or even film some of the practice time on their phones while their children dance to the beat. The band has been incredibly welcoming, seeing not an interruption, but yet another opportunity to love their international neighbors and show a unique brand of hospitality. We are building a community, a place to belong, and we pray that these students will one day decide to visit on a Sunday morning and learn more about Christ. One of our newest students has attended worship services several times already, sitting with his teachers, who quickly found another church member who spoke his heart language to welcome him in.

In our city, as in many cities throughout the country, transportation and childcare are major barriers to community involvement for internationals and, more specifically, to learning English. The public adult ESL programs available locally cannot usually offer childcare, but, as I love to remind churches, God has already made the way for us to do so, as churches’ liability

policies already include childcare for weekly events! Most of the children attend school and speak English well, but we have also created a youth class for a few newcomer refugee kids who needed more English practice time. The other children, who come with their parents, attend a mixed-age childcare group, with games, lessons, and singing, or play in the nursery with other volunteers. We are delighted to build relationships even with these little ones. We pray that they will always keep these memories of being loved inside the church and will one day be drawn to Jesus Christ.

### **The body of Christ is essential to success, across denominations, vocations, and backgrounds.**

*For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually, members of one another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them . . . Romans 12:4–6a*

One of the biggest barriers that I've found in encouraging churches to run English programs is in staffing. "We barely have enough volunteers for Sunday morning activities," I hear, "so I'm not sure we could get anyone else to help with something like an English program." I have no doubt that this is true; however, I also have no doubt that if a few people from each church came together with members of other churches, hundreds of new church-based English programs could be started across the country. This has proven to be true in our program, where we have:

- One full-time ministry worker (me), working for a nonprofit that equips churches for ministry.
- Volunteer teachers from four churches, the majority of whom attend the host church.
- Childcare volunteers, weekly drivers, and substitute drivers, who attend six different churches.
- Community contacts who occasionally help us by translating or interpreting, representing five churches.
- Four churches and one locally-headquartered missions organization that have given funds to help pay for materials, staffing and events.

Though some of these churches have been involved in more than one way, in total, 12 churches from at least six different denominations are represented here. This, truly, is the Body of Christ, as the many members come together to use their different gifts to love and serve. In addition, I've had the privilege of training and consulting with dozens of other volunteers from



even more churches who are tutoring in other church programs or individually, particularly in Afghan refugees' homes in our region.

Our program's volunteers come with particular strengths as well. Several couples serve together, either working together or separately, in teaching or childcare. One of our assistant teachers is also a special education math teacher, so occasionally she steps out of class to help one of the teens in the childcare room work on her algebra homework. Another volunteer has given up several Saturdays to help some of the students study for their citizenship exams. Above all, though, what each person has to give is his or her time. In showing up faithfully each week, God continues to use them to grow relationships and share his love.

We've also found encouragement in being able to refer and connect our students to other community resources. One student received help with applying for Medicaid; others were referred to a local branch of Immigrant Connection, a ministry equipping Department of Justice-accredited legal consultants who provide low-cost immigration legal services. We have referred and even helped arrange rides for students to attend ESL classes with the local adult education program that meet more often during the week than our program. In God's providence, there are believers who work in that program, as well, who are strong partners with us to love and serve our students.

Gallagher (2017) reminds us that "Christ lives in his people through the Spirit as a living presence" (p. 140). In working in this program, I am reminded how the Holy Spirit has mightily provided for and encouraged us by drawing together the right people to love and serve our international friends in this way.

### **Encouraging one another.**

*Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.*

1 Thessalonians 5:11

The more that I work with church-based English program volunteers, the more I see what a rewarding role it is—but also, often, an exhausting one. Lesson planning takes time and effort, and perhaps even more so when you are a first-time teacher and only writing one plan per week. Furthermore, as this is a relational ministry and not just a transactional class, our teachers and students are sharing their very lives in relationship together, dealing with all of the joys and awkwardness and challenges of cross-cultural friendships. Students come and go, sometimes

with no warning. Class sizes swell and drop. New students arrive at all times during the year. And the teachers remain constant, but often they are just tired.

Additionally, because few English ministry volunteers have any professional background in teaching, they can struggle to access helpful resources. One pair of teachers in our program has a one-on-one class with our sole beginner student, who is a native Spanish speaker. While talking to them teachers after class, I mentioned that I had a bilingual picture dictionary that they might find helpful. The following week, they came back to me full of thanks, sharing how helpful that resource had been to them in communicating with the student. This simple suggestion made a big difference in their connection with him!

As I train more and more volunteers in our region, I am finding that their biggest needs are someone to talk to for ideas and affirmation and the knowledge of materials that are appropriate to use in each tutoring or teaching situation. One of my unique privileges has been to distill the information I learned in my MA TESOL program down to be understandable to a volunteer teacher, who has experience, but little or no underlying theoretical knowledge. Through webinars, instructional videos, and individual consultations, it has been a privilege to support these volunteer teachers in areas like teaching preliterate learners, teaching on Zoom, coming up with level-appropriate activities, using error correction strategies, and more. Our nonprofit has also hosted periodic gatherings for church-based English teachers, providing some professional development in terms of reflections and activities they can use, but also (and perhaps more importantly) giving them the space to talk and share their challenges, successes, and experiences.

I would like to encourage my fellow TESOL professionals that this is an area in which our assistance is greatly needed. We can serve as resources for volunteers, helping them choose appropriate books or making suggestions about how to approach certain communities of learners, including children, preliterate adults, and older learners. If each church-based program had access to a TESOL professional who could periodically check in and offer support and insights, imagine how these volunteer teachers could grow and flourish! If you are not aware of a church-based ESL class near you, I would suggest contacting someone with Mission to North America's cross-denominational ESL network at <https://pcamna.org/ministry/esl-ministries/> or the SEND Relief (Southern Baptist) ESL programs at <https://www.sendrelief.org/resource/english-as-a-second-language-esl/>. Our own program has often had visitors from other ministries and the

community sit in on our classes. You might ask if you can visit a local program to learn more and pray about how you could be used in a supporting role.

As Bradridge and Walsh (2019) remind us, “We are all prone to getting weary and Christians are not immune to this. The excitement at the beginning of a new project can soon ebb once routine sets in. Part of your role, if you are the leader, will be to encourage people to carry on, use their gifts, and grow into the roles God has given them” (Section 3, “Getting the best out of volunteers,” para. 4). I would humbly add that all of us, from TESOL professionals to new volunteers, can pray for and encourage one another and offer the resources and insights we have in order to build each other up for longevity and effectiveness in this ministry.

## **Conclusion**

*For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. Matthew 25:35*

Ultimately, ESL ministry is about far more than teaching English. Our relationships go deep and create a safe place for belonging and community, for students to practice English without fear of judgement, and for the Gospel to be shared in word and deed. It has been a gift to be part of this team of volunteers and see how the Lord has woven each member together to accomplish his work of welcoming the stranger even as he grows each one of us in this unique ministry.

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*Rachael Sloan Tsaneva ([logoslanguageconsulting@gmail.com](mailto:logoslanguageconsulting@gmail.com)) has taught English learners from ages 3 to 70+ in public, private, and ministry settings, both in the United States and in Bulgaria. She holds an MA in TESOL/Intercultural Studies from Wheaton College and is a language acquisition instructor with Wheaton's Institute for Cross-Cultural Training. Previously, as a consultant with Restoring Hope Roanoke, she helped churches get involved with the international community and trained volunteer ESL teachers in Roanoke, Virginia. Her areas of interest include teaching preliterate adult learners and sharing information from the professional TESOL community with volunteer teachers.*

