

Bible and Literature for the (Orthodox) Theological English Classroom

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Abstract: *The importance of the bible as/ for literature cannot be denied and outstanding developments such as Northop Frye's to the field (The Great Code: The Bible and Literature, 1981) testify to this reality. However, as an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) trainer, the purpose of our paper is to account for the extent to which canonical literature can be brought into play to the Theological English classroom to improve our students' biblical and literary knowledge and develop their productive and receptive skills in a communicative language teaching (CLT) environment; thus, if Thomas Mann's Joseph and His Brothers (1930-1943) can be definitely considered for study at a Romanian Orthodox faculty, José Saramago's controversial Gospel According to Jesus Christ (1993) and Cain (2009) less so, due to the materialistic atheism prophesized. Consequently, our material consists of several canonical works, the above mentioned ones included, and our methods draw on general and ESP teaching methodology without ignoring the purpose of a Christian English teacher (CET). We will discuss the results of our research emphasizing the general impact of Bible and literature on the professional and personal development of theological students in their academic life and likely career (priests, sacral artists or social workers in a Christian environment).*

Keywords: *Bible and literature, CET, CLT, ESP, Orthodox Theology students.*

1. Introduction

Theological English (TE) is a less researched branch of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) than its siblings, i.e. Business English, Legal English, etc. which can be internationally assessed; for instance, Cambridge offers an International Legal English Certificate (ILEC) and a Business English Certificate (BEC), among others, whereas a learner of TE can only have his general English skills verified and graded. However, the literature of the field has increased steadily for the past three decades and its contribution to the ESP core cannot be denied.

As previously stated in our research [1], on the international stage a distinction between English for Bible and Theology (EBT) and Theological English (TE) was made; the former refers to “the teaching or learning of the specific variety of English used in Bible and theology classes, textbooks and articles in these disciplines, sermons, etc. One subtype of EBT is Theological English (TE), which focuses on aspects of English related to the study of theology, including theological terms, the range of complex sentence structures used in theological writing, and even the broader organisational patterns used by theologians in their teaching and writing” [2]. Consequently, as a branch of ESP, EBT and TE have a role similar to English for Engineering or Medicine for future physicians and is different from English for Occupational purposes (EOP) which was tailored for the needs of workers in the hospitality industry, nurses and other professional categories such as physicists or various engineers. In our approach we combine elements of TE and its branch, EBT to develop our students' receptive (reading and listening) and productive skills (speaking and writing) in a communicative language teaching (CLT) context against an Orthodox Theological English background. In this respect, we share in common with general teaching methodology which reads that an ESP teacher is more than a ‘traditional’ language teacher as s/he needs to consider the students' special knowledge acquired at mainstream academic courses (pertaining to the field of Orthodox Theology, in our case); furthermore, as a non-native speaker we should “discern the particular vocabulary, discourses and processes that are essential to the ESP training of students within a specialised context” [3]. We also draw on CLT and its recent developments which stress the importance of building communicative competence at a sociocultural level without ignoring grammar and

strategic discourse, all aiming at “fostering students’ positive attitude towards communicating in a foreign language and heightening their interest in language and culture, thus deepening international understanding” [4]. Last but not least, we are aware that our role as a teacher is to pass on knowledge to students in a theological setting and the learners we target are mostly pre-experience(d) ones; as a result, as opposed to the low-experience or job-experienced students with hands on practical knowledge acquired at work, which can be brought into play in the classroom, the pre-experience(d) students only come with a theoretical background from their specialty courses. We are dealing with undergraduate students (in their first and second year) from the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, “Dumitru Stăniloae” at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Romania namely: pastoral students who will become priests, future social workers in a Christian Orthodox setting and sacral artists (icon or church wall painters and restorers of old religious books) There is no rule without exception, hence a small number of older low-experience/ job-experienced students in our classes: already priests, monks, nuns or people from various environments (engineers, doctors, etc.) enrolled to get a degree and advance in their careers or simply enhance their spiritual development.

2. Material and Method

Our material consists of ESP and TE methodology as detailed in the introduction, from which we also extracted our methods. Additional material we found extremely helpful pertains to Romanian developments in TE that do not go beyond mere workbooks for students’ use such as Laura Ionică’s *English for Theology* which came out at Pitesti University Publishing House in 2002 and focuses on improving reading skills with texts mainly from Biblical parables and beatitudes and some basic grammar and vocabulary, translation exercises included. We found particularly useful Monica Oancă and Maria Băncilă’s *English for Students in Theology* published by Bucharest University Press in 2014 [5]; the textbook is more comprehensive than the above mentioned one and contains all the necessary information for (Orthodox) theological students, providing authentic material on the daily Orthodox prayers (chapter 1), the reason why vigil lamps are lit in front of icons (ch. 2), how to worship (ch. 3), the symbols of the four evangelists (ch. 4), psalm 50 (ch. 5), the beatitudes (ch. 6), the creed (ch. 7), the Nativity (ch. 8), the Services of Christmas in the Orthodox Church (ch. 9), the Decalogue (ch. 10), Finding a Confessor (ch. 11), elements of church architecture (ch. 13), the clergy and their sacred vestments (ch. 14), elements of Orthodox Christian iconography (ch. 15), the comparative evolution of sacred art in the East and the West (ch. 16), the Annunciation (ch. 17), partakers of divine nature (ch. 18), the human face of God (ch. 19), the Holy Easter (ch. 20), the doctrine of the Trinity (ch. 21), the attributes of God (ch. 22), the structure of the Romanian Patriarchate (ch. 23), tailored to suit their needs plus a glossary of religious terms. The structure of the chapters inspired us in our ‘lesson plans’ of Bible and literature for theological students: a piece of authentic material for gist reading and topics for discussion meant to develop not only our students’ receptive skills (further reading for detail), but also productive ones (speaking/ oral communication and writing) in a learner centred approach and communicative language teaching environment where pair/ group work and interactive activities are essential.

Donald Snow’s account in *English Teaching as Christian Mission: An Applied Theology*, Herald Press, Scottsdale, 2001 was also an inspiration for us as the author, in an Asian setting and an evangelical context, could not deny the influence of English as a means to a missionary end, recommending teaching techniques based on understanding the other and otherness, as well as intercultural communication; he addressed the less familiar character of different cultures, stereotypes, ethnocentrism and the learners’ tendency to exclude foreigners by critical incident exercises and intercultural sensitizers (ICS) [6].

Although the importance of Bible as literature cannot be denied and contributions to ESL/ EFL have also been made in this sense such as Cheri Pierson, Will Bankston and Marilyn Lewis’s *Exploring Parables in Luke: Integrated Skills for ESL/ EFL Students of Theology* (2014) with a theological content designed to “encourage critical thinking through making connections” and the articles can be used as a “theological compass” to understand theology as “*comprehensive* (necessary for every area of life), *cohesive* (comprising a unity

corresponding to the unified, biblical testimony of the Triune God), *creative* (requiring application within unique cultural and situational contexts) and *confessional* (derived from the Bible and informed by the creeds, confessions, and teachings of the church)” [7] we limit our material to canonical literature of biblical inspiration.

3. References

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