

# SAGRADA BIBLIA

## Using the BIBLE to Teach

### a Foreign Language

**T**he first time I heard about the relationship between learning a foreign language and reading the Bible was during one of my linguistics classes. The professor stated: “I have learned several foreign languages just by reading the Bible, [and] although I do not consider myself a Christian believer, I noticed the effective result of learning through an extensive, varied, and valuable book.”<sup>1</sup> As a 19-year-old Adventist student in my first year at a public university, I was deeply affected by the words of this professor. From that moment, I decided that when I became a professor, I would use the Bible as a basic manual to teach a foreign language.

I thought that I was alone in using the Bible as a primary resource for teaching until I found Humberto Rasi’s *Christ in the Classroom* series, which he began in 1993.<sup>2</sup> These books are a compilation of articles and essays about the integration of faith in teaching and learning written by Adventist college professors. Rasi’s philosophy is stated as follows:

“The integration of faith and values with teaching and learning is a deliberate and systematic process of approaching the entire educational enterprise—both curricular and co-curricular—from a Christian perspective. In a Seventh-day Adventist setting, its aim is to ensure that, by the

time students complete their studies, they will have freely internalized beliefs and values and a view of knowledge, life, and destiny that is Bible-based, Christ-centered, service-oriented, and kingdom-directed.”<sup>3</sup>

In reviewing these wonderful resources for Christian teachers, I noticed that while the articles and practical examples came from a variety of subject areas, only one related to English-as-a-second-language teaching, and none related to teaching the Spanish language. This motivated me to fill this faith-teaching gap through using the Bible as a primary resource in my English and Spanish classes, and creating materials that would assist instructors in the integration of faith in teaching and learning.

#### Using the Bible as a Text Base

In 1998, I was hired to teach at an Adventist educational institution in Sagunto, Spain. During the next five years, I taught English as a foreign language to the senior high school students. While I felt an enormous responsibility to prepare these students for their *Selectividad* (Selectivity) examinations, a crucial examination at the end of the course that would determine their ability to enter university and pursue desired careers, I also relished the opportunity to integrate faith with learning. This exam would select from among all the high school students in Spain only those who were really prepared to continue with their education.

The examiners who created this

exam used random magazines, newspapers, and media news to structure comprehension activities. I took the risk of integrating texts from a modern version of the Bible into my lesson plans for the English class.<sup>4</sup> I advised my students to accept the challenge to learn with this method, even though a few of them were not Adventists. The Selectivity test consisted of a final written exam on writing, reading, and grammar, so I created a few activities by using the Bible as the text base. Because the Scriptures contain a variety of vocabulary words, topics, and writing styles, I anticipated that students would obtain good linguistic results at the end of the course. Furthermore, the students, along with the professor, would also be exposed to many educational and spiritual values, as well as the integration of faith and learning. (See examples in Tables 1-3.)

Surprisingly, the results were much better than expected. During the five consecutive years that I prepared students for the Selectivity examination with this method, 100 percent of the students passed and were able to enter the universities of their choice. Furthermore, my students obtained the highest average scores on the test in all the subjects taken by students from our school.

Reading Frank McCourt’s book, *El Profesor*, ushered in a new stage in my life as a teacher and served as a source of inspiration as I searched for tools and methods to help me inte-

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grate faith with learning in my Spanish and English classes. Based on McCourt's personal experiences as a professor of Irish descent teaching at the McKee Institute in New York City, the book describes the passion and struggle of a teacher yearning to reach his students. I was impressed by the words he shared about his first class: "Ya llegan. Y yo no estoy preparado. ¿Cómo iba a estarlo? Soy un profesor nuevo, y estoy aprendiendo con la práctica." ["They are coming. And I am not ready. How would I be? I am a new professor, and I am learning with practice."]5

McCourt used unconventional methods to teach English language and literature in order to awaken a higher interest among his young students. He listened to their inquiries, immersed himself in their communities, tried to understand the realities of their lives, and planned their learning experiences based on their routines and realities outside the classroom. He set out to have an impact on their lives and used several creative approaches to do so. One such method was to engage his students using the Bible. For example, he asked them to write an apology letter from Adam and Eve to God for having been disobedient and falling into sin. Many of his students were familiar with the Bible since they attended Christian churches and Bible schools.

My interest grew as I saw others using the Bible to help students build important skills. Then, when I was completing my doctoral studies, one of my professors encouraged me to pursue this topic and proposed that I read the work of Paulo Freire. Freire states that students need to be "actors, rather than spectators, that they may have a voice, instead of just saying the word, that they may have the opportunity to create and re-create, and transform the world."6

In other words, students should have the opportunity to be heard and to participate in choosing the content of their learning. We, as professors, should also consider this an opportunity to present learning as a vertical system, not just a horizontal one. Integrating faith and the Bible engages stu-

**Table 1. Lesson Plan Example 1.**

*John 10:11-16*

**Topic:** *Study or Work?*

**Title:** *Jesus, the Good Shepherd*

**Writing style:** Argumentative Text

**Level:** Elementary

**Grammar contents:**

- Verb "to be"
- Present Simple Tense
- The Negative Form
- The Auxiliary Verb "to do"
- Verb "to know"

**Reading activities:**

- Question: *What are the characteristics of a good shepherd and a bad shepherd?*

- True/False: *All the sheep know the good shepherd.*

- Synonyms: *pastor - shepherd*

**Writing activities:** *Give your opinion about the differences between a good and a bad student and/or worker.*

**Vocabulary:** *shepherd, sheep, wolf, flock, pastures, hired, belong to, work, rich, money, thief, to care about, to know, life, to abandon, to run, freely*

**Educative values:** *sacrifice, respect, friendship, honesty, responsibility, obedience, work ethic, love*

**Bible values:** *spiritual leadership, good and bad pastors' characteristics, obedience to God, faithfulness, Divinity, Trinity*

**Table 2. Lesson Plan Example 2.**

*Genesis 6-8*

**Topic:** *A Family Trip*

**Title:** *The Story of Noah*

**Writing style:** Narrative Text

**Level:** Intermediate

**Grammar contents:**

- Past Simple Tense
- Future Simple Tense
- Family Words
- Animals

**Reading activities:**

- Question: *How many people traveled with Noah?*
- True/False: *Only the clean animals survived the Flood.*
- Synonyms: *story - account*

**Writing activities:** *Narrate your most recent family vacations.*

**Vocabulary:** *earth, time, ground, sky, day, night, rain, torrent, wind, boat, water, mountain, peak, waterproof, deck, stall, feet, flood, survive, covenant, son, daughter, wife, husband, children, human, family, father, mother, animal, domestic, wild, creature, pair, male, female, bird*

**Educative values:** *hard-working, teamwork, solidarity, creation-evolution, family care, animal care, peace, nature care*

**Bible values:** *goodness, faith, creation, obedience, God's justice and judgment, confidence, forgiveness*

**Table 3. Lesson Plan Example 3.**

*Mark 10:17-31*

**Topic:** *Properties*

**Title:** *Poor Man/Rich Man*

**Writing style:** Dialogue

**Level:** Advanced

**Grammar contents:**

- Past Simple Tense
- Present Perfect Tense
- Past Progressive Tense
- Imperative
- Auxiliary Modal Verbs
- -ly Adverbs
- Housing Words

**Reading activities:**

- Question: *Why did Jesus ask the rich man to sell all his possessions?*

- True/False: *The young man left happy because he was very rich.*

- Synonyms: *belonging - property*

**Writing activities:** *Write a dialogue of a conversation that you had or you listened to about two people talking about the purchase of a house.*

**Vocabulary:** *inherit, house, property, commandments, testify, cheat, honor, teacher, to sell, possessions, money, poor, rich, treasure, kingdom, intently, truly, falsely, humanly, must*

**Educative values:** *honor, respect, obedience, generosity*

**Bible values:** *worship, eternity, witnessing, faithfulness, love, discipleship, salvation, humility*

dents in thinking about their relationship with God within the context of the area of study. Adventist schools and colleges have an excellent opportunity to embrace the Bible as an essential manual that can help students learn linguistic and spiritual content. To further this goal, I would like to present a practical section describing how I have been integrating Adventist educative values, faith, and the Bible in my Spanish-language teaching at the college level.

### Creation of Materials

As a result of almost 20 years of experience teaching a foreign language, 10 years of research, and 15 years working on activities that include Bible usage, I decided to create a series of professional Spanish manuals, following the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) guidelines, including the universal educative values,<sup>7</sup> and integrating the Bible and faith in learning and teaching in both the implicit and explicit curriculum, in the teaching of college-level Spanish.<sup>8</sup> These manuals have been published and are available for use in Christian colleges. (See Box 1.)

### Meaning of *IFELE*

This project has been named *IFELE* (Integración de la Fe en la Enseñanza de la Lengua Española—*Integration of Faith in Teaching the Spanish Language*). *IFELE* provides materials that integrate faith and the Bible and can be used in the teaching and learning of Spanish in Christian classrooms. Smith and Carvill convey that the gift of the stranger consists of faith, hospitality, and foreign-language learning, and that all the languages in the world deserve to be considered in the same way.<sup>9</sup> Currently, few studies have looked at the integration of faith and the Bible in the teaching of English, or other foreign languages, as a second language. This is also the case with Spanish, although I have found a few individual articles and activities.<sup>10</sup> As a result, I have been working on the *IFELE* project during my almost 20 years of experience teaching a foreign language. (See Example 1.)

During this time, I learned that the

acquisition of a second language is a very complex process; and thus, any element that we as linguists and teachers can find to facilitate it will help to reduce learner anxiety, as well as motivate students to accelerate the four main steps through which learners usually progress in learning a new language: euphoria, frustration, discouragement, and satisfaction.<sup>11</sup>

Lanauze and Snow support the idea that “unfamiliar content may be as great an interference in comprehension as is unfamiliar form.”<sup>12</sup> This is why the ACTFL Guidelines are so relevant. Below are a few characteristics this organization recommends that a teacher take into account when creating assignments, particularly at the beginning and intermediate levels:

- Use a limited number of letters, symbols, or signs; identify high-frequency words and/or sentences strongly supported by the context (reading).
- Create short, connected, non-complex texts with personal, social, and familiar topics (reading).
- Ask students to copy or transcribe familiar words and sentences (writing).
- Require learners to produce by memory only a limited number of isolated words or familiar sentences (writing).
- Ask students to describe personal preferences, daily routines, common events, and other personal topics (writing).

- Have students exchange greetings and identify and name a number of familiar objects in the immediate environment, within a familiar framework (speaking).

- Ask students to talk about their personal interests and preferences related to self, family, home, and daily activities (speaking).

- Help students recognize isolated words or high-frequency sentences within a context (listening).

- Remember that comprehension is most often accurate with highly familiar and predictable topics (listening).

- Use approaches that help students act with greater awareness of self, of other cultures, and their relationships to those cultures, in a variety of settings (community).

- Structure assignments so that students start learning from their own community of practice (comfort zone), in order to participate more fully in global community and worldwide marketplace (community).<sup>13</sup>

Based on the official aforementioned ACTFL guidelines, one can see the connection to the *IFELE* project, which is built on familiarity, faith-integrative principles, and community concepts.

### Use of Familiar Content

Anderson and Pearson indicated that “comprehension, by definition, is the process of relating new or incoming information already stored in memory. Readers make connections

#### Box 1. *IFELE* (Integración de la Fe en la Enseñanza de la Lengua Española—*Integration of Faith in Teaching the Spanish Language*) Textbooks

*IFELE Elementary Spanish I* (Columbus, Ohio: Biblio Publishing, 2014). ISBN: 978-1-62249-216-6: <https://bibliobookstore.com/International-Languages/IFELE-Elementary-Spanish-I-by-Francisco-Burgos>

*IFELE Elementary Spanish II* (Columbus, Ohio: Biblio Publishing, 2014). ISBN: 978-1-62249-231-2: <https://bibliobookstore.com/International-Languages/IFELE-Elementary-Spanish-II-by-Francisco-Burgos>

*IFELE Intermediate Spanish I* (Columbus, Ohio: Biblio Publishing, 2014). ISBN: 978-1-62249-185-8: <https://bibliobookstore.com/International/IFELE-ESPANOL-INTERMEDIO-I-by-Francisco-Burgos>

*IFELE Intermediate Spanish II* (Columbus, Ohio: Biblio Publishing, 2014). ISBN: 978-1-62249-186-5: <https://bibliobookstore.com/International/IFELE-ESPANOL-INTERMEDIO-II-by-Francisco-Burgos>





between the new information on the printed page and their existing knowledge.”<sup>14</sup> Langer and Applebee add that “one does not simply learn and write about particular things in particular ways.”<sup>15</sup> Instead, one can learn from a variety of sources, and the information is more meaningful when those sources are familiar.

Anne Ediger<sup>16</sup> also defended the familiar aspect because from her personal perspective, it would be much easier to learn moving from the known or familiar to the unknown or unfamiliar content. She mentioned three fundamental elements: text (familiar content), reader (group identity), and context (linguistic features). Finally, as mentioned above, the ACTFL guidelines recognize key words, cognates, and contextualized phrases and sentences with predictable or familiar information, especially for beginning learners of a foreign language. This organization explores the need to motivate the teachers and learners to produce texts related to their daily routines through familiar topics and contents.

Sandra Savignon<sup>17</sup> named the fun-

damental elements that appropriate 21st-century instruction should deliver:

1. Teaching should be “new” or “innovative,” in the sense of transforming the learners into active participants who are able to interpret, express, and negotiate their own meanings.
2. The teacher should seek to achieve balance between the sociocultural context, the learning strategies, the discourse cohesion, and the less-popular grammar aspect of the course.

#### **Use of the Bible in English Language and Literature Classes**

Throughout history, many prejudices have existed against the use of the Bible as a text to teach a foreign language because of the relationship between this book and some prohibited terms in the context of secular education, such as *religion*, *faith*, *moral values* or, in a critical sense, a certain *fundamentalism* by some teachers who have coercively proselytized in their classrooms. However, Astin, Astin, and Lindholm<sup>18</sup> have suggested that care for the spiritual lives of students can

improve their emotional state and, as a result, their academic performance as well. Elaine Horwitz<sup>19</sup> observed that class realities which contradict students’ expectations about learning may discourage them and, as a consequence, interfere with the accomplishment of their desired objectives. Nunan argued that “teachers should find out what their students think and feel about what they want to learn and how they want to learn.”<sup>20</sup>

Finally, a few secular authors have defended the use of the Bible in language and literature classes. Marie Wachlin<sup>21</sup> commended the Bible as a textbook to teach a language since it has inspired other disciplines, such as music, poetry, and art, with a variety of forms and literary styles. Wachlin encouraged linguists, professors, students, administrators, and investigators to use the Bible more frequently in American schools, especially in colleges and universities. However, the Bible must be taught in a tolerant, flexible, responsible, objective, and critical way. Professors in Christian schools can openly use the Bible to help students develop positive character traits and a relationship with God, as well as to achieve academic goals.

Morris and Smith<sup>22</sup> found a direct relationship between student retention at Syracuse University and the integration of the Bible as literature for English-language learning. Edward Bonard,<sup>23</sup> the pioneer of a faith movement that based its teaching method of English as a second language on using the Bible as a literary text for conversational skill, developed a program titled “Let’s Start to Speak” (*Empecemos a hablar*) in Nashville, Tennessee. The program has helped more than 3,000 immigrants from some 300 countries. Bonard sought to establish a comparative analysis of the results between familiar and unfamiliar texts. He found that the use of familiar texts from the Bible showed better results than the texts taken from other books.

#### **Use of the Bible in Spanish Language and Literature Classes**

Although I have reviewed numerous and diverse studies on the use of

the Bible to teach Spanish as a second language, I have yet to find one dealing with the effect of Bible texts on teaching and learning. This therefore needs further study by Christian Spanish-language professors. They, along with the administrators, investigators, and linguists, all have the responsibility to study how to deliver Spanish as a foreign language in ways that increase acquisition of a language that continues to be in high demand.

### Communities Integrating Bible and Faith

Benedict Anderson spoke about the concept of nationality as something that should be “natural, in the sense that it contains something that is unchosen (much like gender, skin color, and parentage).”<sup>24</sup> While this may be so, there are many for whom nationality is a choice, and the result is a community of practice in which they willingly participate. Bonny Norton<sup>25</sup> emphasized the importance of motivating a specific community of language learners to participate in the practices that characterize the new communities, that they may feel the need to integrate their own realities into their learning. In his investigation, Norton included the negative experiences of two students, Katarina and Felicia, who became discouraged and abandoned their English classes because they didn’t feel accepted as active participants in the new community. Lave and Wenger stated that “learning as an increasing participation in communities of practice concerns the whole person acting in the world.”<sup>26</sup> Eda Derhem<sup>27</sup> observed that linguists estimate that about 80 percent of the 60,000 existing languages today will eventually disappear, and insisted on the importance of respecting the identities of communities of linguistic practice by avoiding separation of language from culture and society.

Smith and Carvill concluded that “If, therefore, I do not understand the meaning of what I am saying, I will be a foreigner for the speaker, and she/he will be a foreigner for me.”<sup>28</sup> Goulah advocated for transformative learning “in interlocking structures of race, class, gender, and power in the context

of the standards-based world language and culture learning . . . to transform learners’ tendencies, attitudes, and actions contributing to them. . . . While critical literacy is necessary, transformative learning is desirable.”<sup>29</sup>

Rito Baring<sup>30</sup> explained why the students in his Christian community in the Philippines read the Bible as an act of faith. Even though the students were Generation X learners, who read very little in general and the Bible even less, he discovered that they could be motivated to read and learn better when they read the Bible as part of their learning experience.

Within a community of language learners, the students can transcend the linguistic, developing their own personal relationship with God, learning about life outside the classroom, practicing critical thinking, discerning between the good and the bad, the convenient and inconvenient. Therefore, Bible content cannot be neutral, but can be used respectfully with consideration of the community of practice.

Morris, Beck, and Smith indicated that unlike secular or public institutions, Christian schools emphasize the importance of students developing wholistically. Spiritual growth is at the core of the overall curriculum, and integrating faith with learning, both in the classroom and in school-wide activities, will help students develop and embrace a Christian worldview. In their study, “when a student reported being spiritually integrated, [he or she was] more likely to persist.”<sup>31</sup>

### Final Thoughts

In 2006, I began teaching Spanish as a second language at Oakwood University in Huntsville, Alabama, U.S.A. The interest in Spanish-language learning and the number of students enrolling in Spanish classes has increased from about 30 to approximately 140 students per semester between 2006 and 2017. More than 90 percent of Oakwood’s student population are Christians, so most are familiar with Bible content. During the fall and spring 2010-2011 semester courses, the university distributed a survey in order to determine how students perceived their spiritual

growth on campus. Approximately 800 students completed the 52-item *Life-Core*®2011 survey. In addition, approximately 852 students were interviewed.<sup>32</sup>

According to *LifeCore*®2011, 67 percent of the students surveyed found the religious activities interesting, 50 percent said they were significant, and 43 percent said they were relevant. In relation to student involvement in the community, 46 percent of the students were willing to help others understand the Bible. With regard to personal spiritual activities, 73 percent of respondents said they read the Bible frequently, compared to four percent of the participants in Barna Research Group’s national survey taken in 2003,<sup>33</sup> which studied 2,033 adults in the United States. Finally, 32 percent of the Oakwood students said that Bible reading had a significant impact on their knowledge and study of the Bible, still much higher than the national average. This could be because the Bible is integrated throughout the curriculum, not taught only in religion courses.

In their responses to the *LifeCore*® 2011 survey, students enrolled in Spanish courses said that integration of the Bible in their courses helped increase their interest and understanding:

- “Yes, familiar texts helped me correlate and understand Spanish a lot better”;
- “Yes, it was really helpful. I was able to identify stories and it was easier to identify words, as I associated it with Bible story”;
- “Yes, relating Spanish with texts that I already knew helped me remember it easier”;
- “Yes, it’s a great teaching tool. I find it easier learning something in Spanish [that] I am familiar with rather than a random poem or dialogue”;
- “Yes, I took two years Spanish in [a] Christian school but never learned with Bible texts. I look forward being placed in [a] group to learn using familiar texts.”

To summarize, I found a significant number of previous studies that demonstrated an impact as the result of using the Bible in English-language

learning. However, it was almost impossible to discover similar findings about the impact of the Bible on Spanish-language learning. This, then, became the rationale for my creating materials to teach Spanish as a second language at the college level. Scripture says: “For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline. So never be ashamed to tell others about our Lord” (2 Timothy 1:7, 8, NLT).<sup>34</sup> As Christian teachers, each of us has a responsibility to continue to use the Bible in our courses and to create materials that integrate faith in teaching within Christian education. ✍

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