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The Method of Teaching New Testament Greek

Introduction

Teaching Greek for Bible College students became my duty about thirty years ago. I approached the task with some hesitancy. It was certainly not the assignment I felt best prepared to accept.

Over the years I have used almost every approach that became available to me for presenting the language to students entering the ministry. As with most professors, I first began teaching using the approaches that were used when I began learning the language. I was not satisfied with 1) the effectiveness of the techniques, 2) the attitudes of students toward the study, or 3) my own satisfaction with teaching the language.

This led me to ask the questions, which I believe every teacher, should ask with regard to teaching any material or skill. For Greek these questions include the following:

1. What is the purpose for teaching New Testament Greek?

The great majority of students who are required to learn Koine Greek often ask the same question. We certainly are attempting to do something more important than introducing another means to test the student's talent and ability to earn a degree. We are not seeking to frustrate students.

On the other hand we are not, typically, attempting to produce "Greek Scholars." By "Greek Scholars" I mean those who will make language scholarship or teaching the primary role in their ministry. As their principal purpose, the Bible College and Seminary should not focus on producing academic specialists. Several research studies have focused on

this tendency of the professor to reproduce him/her self as one of the faults in such programs (MLCU). Greek professors should not be attempting to reproduce themselves. We have a relatively limited market for these specialists. We may want to challenge the more talented in language to consider that role, but the central purpose of Bible colleges and Seminaries focuses on producing a ministry for the local church and the mission field.

I maintain that our programs properly should focus on preparing men/women for the ministry of the church. To do this, these students should be able to use capably the ancient languages in order to act as expositors of the Word of God. Bernard Ramm says, "We cannot establish the great doctrines of our Faith on any basis less than that of the original languages" (1956, p.108). The use the graduate makes of the ancient languages depends on his attitude toward their study and his skill in using them within the restriction of time and his opportunities. Thus, our goal should be that, in so far as we can, we will seek to see that every graduate entering the ministry can and *will* intelligently use the Greek language as a constant tool in exegetical work.

One conversation with a representative of an accrediting body (ABHE) included the comment that only about 10% of those who graduate from Seminaries having studied the Greek language make any significant use of it in their personal study and professional work. In my estimation this indicates that we are failing in the most important objective for offering a study of the language.

2. Why do most students dread the prospect of fulfilling a Greek requirement?

The first reason for this, I propose, is that students have been taught that Greek is difficult and time-consuming. Greek earned this reputation when it was added to the list of "dead languages," much like Latin, which the schools used as the language of instruction. Part of the

reputation for difficulty came from the intense efforts to recover its use by scholars. Second, the learning patterns implemented in teaching Greek have been based on the learning theory of John Locke (1632-1704) (Cubberley, 1948, p. 403). Locke advocated extensive memorization of often meaningless material as a means to training the memory. Locke, however, did not understand the human mind and the theory he advocated was wrong. Third, the student has not quickly experienced the joy of discovery through the use of the language. Fourth, this has produced in the schools a tradition of "getting through" the study of Greek rather than anticipation of the opportunity to learn it as a marvelous tool.

3. Is there no better way to reach our objective?

After some years of experimentation, I decided to apply what I had learned in other disciplines to the teaching of Greek. The background I brought to the study included:

1) A graduate doctoral major in education,

2) A graduate doctoral minor, of approximately the same number of courses, in Educational Psychology including a study of learning theory,

3) Certification as an elementary school reading teacher, and

4) Some contact with the approach to language used by the diplomatic corps.

I concluded that I could find a better way. My experience has reinforced that conviction. My most recent years as professor of New Testament Greek have convinced me that the approach I now take is effective and more nearly accomplishes the goals of teaching the language in Bible college and Seminary. My reasons for that conclusion include the following:

1) After the first weeks my students no longer fear the study,

2) Typically, class has become a "fun" time and an adventure,

3) Beginning with the first year my students use their Greek as an important tool in their other study, and

4) In 2008 using email and telephone contacts Professor Callahan, who also uses these materials, and I surveyed all of those students who had completed Beginning Greek with this approach and for whom we had contact information. The survey asked this question: "How much do you use your Greek? a) frequently, b) occasionally, 3) seldom, or 4) not at all. The following table reports the results.

Answer	Proportion
Frequently	36.4 %
Occasionally	54.5 %
Seldom	9.1 %
Not at all	0.0 %

Table I - Use of Greek by Graduates

4. What principles undergird an improved approach advocated here?

First, the approach should be based on sound learning theory. This theory should incorporate at least the following elements.

Higher Learning Patterns. John Locke erred in assuming that the mind, like a muscle, would improve its memory capability by difficult memorization (Cubberley, 1948). Extensive memorization produces improved strategies for memorization, but does not increase the ability to memorize. If the learner implements higher order learning patterns, learning becomes easier and

more effective. Gagne (Gagne, 1965, Ch. 2-6) discusses eight forms of learning. The student more easily acquires higher order types of learning and these types of learning produce more durable results. Levine (Levine, 2002, Ch. 8) states that this higher thinking system includes a) concepts, b) problem solving, c) critical thinking, d) creativity and e) rules. All except "creativity" seem easily applicable, and even that is not excluded, from good work in Greek. Levine also indicates (p. 129ff) that six levels of language are important to study of language: a) phoneme, b) morphemes, c) word meanings (semantics), d) syntax, e) discourse (larger chunks), and f) metalinguistics. The first two are more important in study of a language already learned orally, but the other four are essential to learning Greek.

Best Practices from English Language Pedagogy. Learning to read Greek should incorporate principles which we have found effective in teaching the reading of English. Since the student does not learn Greek from daily conversations, the teacher must adjust the teaching to implement the appropriate principles. Reutzel and Cooter (2004, p. 81) discuss the trend to combine "bottom up" (phonic) approaches with "top down" (sight word) approaches into an interactive theory and skills based approach. Both approaches and the combination thereof, offer resources for the teacher of Greek. The former deals extensively with word structures. The later deals with "sight words."

Only 109 of the "sight words" account for 50% of the words in students texts (Reutzel and Cooter, 2004, p. 127). The authors go on to recommend the "Fry list" (1980) as the "best-researched list of sight words in the English language." They go on to say "It is critical that all our students learn to instantly recognize sight words" (p. 127). Bruce M. Metzger's word lists in Lexical Aids for Students of New Testament Greek (1955) provide a Greek parallel.

Students of any language have as a central task developing a vocabulary. The same authors indicate that this should involve both direct teaching of word meaning and also strategies with which the students can learn on their own (Reutzel and Cooter, 2004, p. 125). Learning English involves a series of vocabularies: aural (heard), oral (spoken), written, and reading (recognition). All but the last require a recall of the word. The last requires only recognition. This is the *only* vocabulary the student needs to translate the New Testament, and therefore is the one emphasized here.

Developing vocabulary from reading involves use of contextual clues (Durkin, 1993, p. 165-66), including both the syntactic (position in the sentence) and the semantic (related to the context.) Reutzel and Cooter (2004) propose a "cloze" technique (p. 165) in which words are deleted and the student encouraged to use clues in predicting the correct word. This closely parallels our approach to translation in which any word not recognized is represented by a _____ and after the passage has been completed, the student returns to attempt to predict the missing words based on the clues available before consulting other sources.

Reutzel (2004, p. 113), as well as Heilman (Heilman,1994, p. 81), emphasizes the use of structural analysis in developing vocabulary. This includes recognizing prefixes, suffixes, inflectional endings, roots, and compound words.

Finally, Heilman (1994, p. 137) comments that "knowing words can range from a simple level to a complex level." Greek vocabulary includes this element, and many elements of exegesis depend on the more complex meanings. In this regard we make extensive use of the word study which attempts to exhaust the sources of information about the word and its meaning.

Retention of vocabulary as well as other information concerning Greek must be stored in Long Term Memory. Kowalski and Westen (2005, pp. 210-17) make a number of statements

which seem to have particular significance for the study of Greek. First they say that for retention in long term memory "it must be encoded or cast into a representational form or code that can be readily accessed." Second, they say, "simple repetitive rehearsal that maintains information momentarily in working memory is not optimal for LTM. Usually, a more effective strategy is to attend to the *meaning* of the stimulus and form mental connections between it and previously stored information" (Kowalski and Westen,210). Third, they say "storing memory in multiple representational modes—such as words, images and sounds—provides the greater likelihood that it will be assessable for later retrieval (p. 212). They then discuss the usefulness of networks and schemas in retrieval (pp. 214-17).

Second**,** the student should learn material through use. Only that information which is used will be retained. Our effort should be to get the student to read as extensively as possible in the Greek text. In order to do this, it must be made as simple and easy as possible.

Third, the student should not be required to gain an encyclopedic knowledge when he/she can quickly consult an encyclopedia. In other words, if there is a reference book, computer program, etc., which can simplify the task of quickly making needed identifications, good stewardship of time indicates that the student should use it. Such lexical aids exist as books (Friberg) and as computer programs "BibleWorks"and "Libronix and free programs available on line including "zhubert.com" and "E Sword" (see my comment below on interlinears.)

The technique for teaching language used by John Amos Comenius (1592-1670, Cubberley, 1948, p. 408) can be respectably employed. Dr. John Neitz (1954-58) considered Comenius to be the second greatest educator between the first and the twentieth century. Comenius prepared the first graded textbooks, and in them taught languages by a parallel text approach (Cubberley, p. 412.). In this approach the student reads as far as he can in the new

language, then consults a parallel text (in opposite position) to assist and correct his translation. It may seem strange that I still *strongly oppose the use* of interlinears. That opposition comes from the fact that the student using an interlinear tends to read the English translation (usually a very poor one) and misses the effort of seeking to determine the meaning independent of help. This element constitutes the most important learning element in the parallel text approach. I encourage students to use a good English translation as an *aid* in translation, *provided* that they use the approach of Comenius.

Fourth, the student should be required to learn only those skills that are pertinent to his purpose. In this case the purpose is that the student will read the Greek language as a tool for exegesis. He/she should *never* be asked to translate English into Greek or to use Greek as a medium of conversation.

Finally**,** the student *must* master the correct translation of each grammatical form and the grammatical structure in which they appear. Syntax and idiom must NOT be neglected in the study.

Putting It All Together: Methodology

In the past thirty years I believe I have tried almost every approach to teaching Greek, including a traditional one, a programmed text, etc. I have finally put my graduate and professional studies into my classroom teaching of Greek and found that the method that, for me, works most effectively includes these elements.

First, I have prepared a Greek primer. In doing that, I have used the Metzger word lists, introducing the most commonly used words first. This parallels the "sight" word lists used in elementary reading. It also parallels A *Beginner's Reader-Grammar for New Testament Greek*.

(Colwell. Harper and Row), which used a reader as basic to instruction, but did not use the Metzgar word lists.

As a supplement to the primer I prepared a *Handbook* with charts illustrating the inflections of the language, the elements of syntax, and rules for grammatical constructions. I encourage students to put these pages in plastic covers so that they can be moved about and consulted easily without needing to be constantly replaced. The student learns the inflection system through tense indicators and parallels between declensions. In this I avoid as much as possible any memorization.

For reading, I did not adopt a computer program that identified forms. Rather, I rather adopted Barbara and Timothy Friberg's *Analytical Greek New Testament* (1981). This identifies the forms via abbreviations below each word. I have indicated above that there are computer and internet resources, which give the same assistance.

I insist on *word studies as a central* feature of each term. With these the student deepens his/her level of appreciation of vocabulary and has many opportunities to develop skill in the use of all the standard reference works.

Results of the Approach

First, my students appear to quickly lose their fear of learning the language. One doctoral student who took my undergraduate Greek class as an elective remarked, "I was not afraid of Greek, but you about scared me to death with English." We have fun and laugh a lot in Greek class.

As a certified English teacher, I am a strong believer in structural English as an essential to correct interpretation. My position is supported by Levine's comment (2002) that a student "who has never fully managed to absorb completely the phonology, semantics or sentence

structure in his native language is likely to encounter even more serious problems doing so" in another language (p. 145). I recommend a serious review of English to students beginning Greek.

Second, my students after working through the 'Primer" (usually in about 12 weeks) are able to begin translation of John's gospel with a vocabulary which permits them to know in most cases all but two or three words in each verse. They develop vocabulary notebooks for these, and gradually add words as they use them.

Third, as indicated in Table 1, a high proportion of my students continue to use their Greek as a significant tool in exegetical work.

Fourth, my experience in the use of the approach to teaching Greek presented here has made teaching a joy and my students my friends. Together we have explored parts of the New Testament I had not considered as part of the instruction within the typical two years of Greek. We have even made some brief excursions into the LXX.

Discussion

I hope for the sake of the future of the church that the day will come when those who are in the ministry, in the great majority, will find in their use of Greek 1) an indispensable tool in Biblical interpretation, 2) an enjoyable vehicle for their personal devotional reading, and 3) a fascinating activity as they explore the potential of meaning in the vocabulary, grammar and syntax of the Greek language.

If I can give one more gift to the Master as a teacher, it would be that this become at least in principle the way that our students are introduced to the study of the language of the New Testament.

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