

## 論文

# Educational and Social Benefits of English Bible Study for Adult EFL Learners

Rosa Suen

### Abstract

This qualitative study reports the life of a small religious group, and the practices of collective reading and interpretation in the EFL context of Japan. A Bible study group consisting of nine Japanese participants and one American facilitator was the focus of the study. Findings showed that when adult EFL learners gather to read and discuss various English Bible texts, there are significant benefits that this form of social action has on their language learning and social lives.

**Keywords:** Bible study, English for Bible and Theology (EBT), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), reader-response theory, textual practice

### Introduction

This study examined a relatively new kind of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) known as English for Bible and Theology (EBT). For EBT, English is used as the medium of communication between non-native speakers (NNS) of English. Moreover, English texts are what these NNS read in order for them to acquire specialized knowledge of the Bible and theology in general (Pierson & Bankston, 2013). Up to date, most studies conducted on EBT have focused on their application to academic studies at the university level. This raises concerns as it is surprising to recognize that researchers in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) have thus far overlooked one of the most

vital sites of EBT implementation: group Bible study. For this reason, the current study attempted to fill this research gap by investigating such a group. Specifically, this study explored what happens when a small group of NNS Christians gather to read and discuss the Bible in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context in Japan, particularly looking into the educational and social benefits of English bible study for adult EFL learners.

## **Literature Review**

### *Bible Study for Social Interaction and Community Belonging*

In churches throughout the United States, congregationally, Bible study encourages new members' participation in the local church, increase bonds of fellowship, and socialize new members into the local culture of the church (Eiesland, 2000). From the perspective of community belonging, no other form of small group in any discipline is as widespread in American life as group Bible study (Lawson, 2006). In particular, Bible study has been described as functioning to provide emotional support by generically reinforcing beliefs and values, while also serving as a source of spiritual growth for its participants (Becker, 1999). Because of the multiple functions Bible study assumes, Christians throughout the United States emphasize its need in their individual and collective lives.

In the case of Japan, freedom of religion for the public was spread following the Meiji Restoration, and the number of Japanese Christians has been slowly increasing since then. Today, about one to two million Japanese nationals are Christians, and churches can be found across the country (Mullins, 2003). For Christians in Japan, group Bible study is believed to exert the same importance in both their personal and social lives the same as to their American counterparts.

*EBT as a form of ESP*

When it comes to foreign language learning, experts like Hutchinson and Waters (1987) note that ESP is not a particular kind of language or methodology that is taught with a particular type of teaching material. Rather, ESP should be seen as an approach to language learning which is based on learner needs. Put simply, ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method should be based on the learner's need for learning. According to Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), an extensive amount of research into ESP has been conducted, particularly into the areas of English for academic purposes (EAP) and English for occupational purposes (EOP) in the field of SLA. In addition, areas of academic specializations, such as Business English and Medical English are growing and becoming increasingly interdisciplinary. This trend of using English to learn specific content has also spread to the learning of theology. In fact, with the rapid growth of Christianity worldwide, many individuals outside English speaking countries are seeking opportunities to study theology under the EBT framework.

EBT is an approach that combines two educational contexts: English language learning and the content of the Bible and theology (Pierson & Bankston, 2013). As EBT requires insights from the discipline of English language learning, applied to the disciplines of biblical and theological studies, it requires substantial integration of English education principles with Christian thought and practice. For the learner, EBT cultivates a community in which theology is engaged and expressed in a personally meaningful way. Put in another way, the principles of EBT instruction aim to combat theological abstraction and to assist learners in relating theological knowledge to their lives and communities. In the case of Bible study, the main learning objective is often communication of meaning, where the learner is free to interpret Bible readings

relevant to their personal needs. In other words, the learner does not simply interpret the Bible readings literally, but are free to add their own personal touch to their interpretation.

#### *Reader-response theory*

Reader-response theory, as it came to be known, objected to the assertion that texts contain finalized meanings via defined authorial intentions or specific properties of genre (Davis & Womack, 2012). To reader-response theorists, meaning is invested in a text by its interlocutors, thereby restoring a more active role to the reader. However, in an EFL context, the idea of an active reader can be socially problematic because the reading of texts is culturally derived within particular settings of society and history (Fish, 1980). As such, reading and interpretation are fundamentally cultural acts, and there exists a multiplicity of social meanings that arise from the reader-text interaction. In an EFL Bible study group, one product of collective reading is Bible interpretation, which should be understood as both a form of mutual knowledge production and strong stimulus to action in relations to individual learner's daily life.

#### *Addressing Cultural Difference*

It is not surprising that as EFL learners engage in EBT learning, they may experience difficulties grasping the cultural usage of language terms in western theology. One major reason contributing to this situation is learners' lack of knowledge of western cultures as language can never be properly acquired apart from its culture (Woodruff, 2013). In fact, many EFL learners have not yet attained the English proficiency required for tasks such as reading theological texts or communicating with their peers. Yet, the teachers of many of these learners lack the required skills for assessing learners' needs or designing and implementing effective English lessons to improve their learners' language skills and cultural understanding. To this situation, one practical teaching

approach for addressing the issue is to employ the instruction of English as a foreign language, where teachers include both a language and a culture focus for every lesson they give their learners.

With the spread of Christianity worldwide, there is little reason to wonder if there is a need for more research on the religious practice of English Bible study. After all, what is lacking throughout the existing literature on Bible study is an in-depth account that situates Bible study within a defined framework to understand the educational and social significance of this phenomenon for its participants in an EFL context. This study was conducted to fill this research gap.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In order to understand the dynamics of English Bible study in an EFL context, one must attend to the sites of its cultural production and reflection. This is because in the midst of casual oral interactions, much happens. In the case of the current study, much happened that informed about the nature of learning for non-native students in an English Bible study group in Japan. The goal of the present study was to explore the characteristics of Bible study life. The research questions addressed are as follows:

1. What are the defining educational benefits of Bible study in regards to the EBT approach?
2. How does the world of Bible study translate and become effectual for individuals as they go about living their social lives?

To get at these questions, this study posited itself on two frameworks for studying cultural life: (a) a focus on social institutions, emphasizing the role of face-to-face encounters, and (b) a focus on the use of texts to mediate ideas

and motives for action, highlighting the role of collective reading.

## **Methodology**

It is said that a researcher has to “come to grips with his or her ontological and epistemological beliefs” (Hatch, 2002, p.32) in order to proceed to determining what research method to use. In this regard, I chose to situate this research in the constructivist paradigm. Thus, the current study can be categorized as utilizing a naturalistic qualitative research method where data is produced in the form of narratives, interpretations and reconstructions, unlike traditional research that are known to be controlled, contrived or manipulated (Hatch, 2002).

With respect to the ethnographic research tradition, sociologists and anthropologists have relied most heavily on a combination of participant observation and structured interviews. These two methods are vital forms of ethnographic data collection, and both are tools used throughout the course of fieldwork conducted for this study. During fieldwork, I took copious handwritten notes on all Bible study group meetings which I had attended in person.

The approach to the current group Bible study was ethnographic in nature as I spent extended time with an actual Bible study group where participants performed this social event. As this study aimed to explore human behaviors within the context of their natural occurrence, the qualitative approach thus was the plausible research method for conducting this study.

### *Participants, Setting, and Data Collection*

The present study is based on three months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out between April 2016 and July 2016. One American pastor and nine Japanese participants (six men and three women) from an English Bible study group at a Lutheran church in the greater Tokyo area consented to participating

in the study. In total, I observed eight bible study meetings and audio-recorded four of these meetings. The group met every Thursday night for one hour to study the English Bible. At each meeting, participants took turns reading the Bible and selected texts for study by recommendation among themselves. The participants are different from each other in age (40s to 60s), social classes (ranging from unemployed to medical professionals), and educational backgrounds (ranging from high school graduates to graduate degree holders). Two 30-minute interviews (one in the beginning and one at the end of the study) were conducted with each participant regarding their understanding of English Bible study and their self-reflection on own attitudes, perceptions and participation at the group meetings. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Then, the transcribed data was reviewed by the participants to obtain feedback in a manner consistent with what Guba and Lincoln (1989) described as member checks for increasing the study's authenticity.

#### *Ethical Considerations*

Ethical considerations were taken into account when conducting this study. In the very beginning of the study, an informed consent form was orally explained to the participants by the researcher in person. In addition, all names of people used in this study have been changed to allow participants to remain anonymous.

#### **Findings**

An initial premise of this study is the character of group Bible study as a social event. Thorough analysis of collected data indicated that Bible study is an event defined by open, reflexive, and critical dialogue about central models of belief and action. It is a social space where Christians reflect on questions of

text, theology, morality, identity, and spirituality. Below is a list of educational and social benefits identified for engaging in Bible study life in the EFL context. The analysis was conducted relying on the data collected from interviews with Bible group participants and class observations.

### *Educational Benefits*

From the education perspective, first, Bible study in general served as a site for the production of knowledge for all participants involved. This happened as the pastor, who is the facilitator of the Bible group meetings, invited group participants to discuss a particular segment in the Bible. The following example shows how the participants in the current study engaged in such an interaction of collective knowledge production. This interaction between the pastor, Masa, Akiko and Ken happened after the pastor had declared to the class that the focus for discussion was the verses in Psalm 19 in the old testament of the Bible.

P: We have creations and communication. These are what these verses are about. So creation doesn't use speech or words, but its voices are still being heard. So what do you think that means? Have you ever listened to creation?

M: Genesis.

P: Right. What about today? Did you listen to creation today?

A: Sky.

P: Right. Do you hear trees and the leaves on the trees? Yes, creation makes a lot of noise so that's its voice.

K: [laugh] Spirits. Like in Shintorism. (June 23, 2016)

As the above interaction shows, Masa instantly reacted to the pastor's question



by recalling his knowledge of God creating the world although he failed to answer the question. However, Akiko then came up with the answer “sky”, which is often associated with God’s creation in the West. After hearing both Masa and Akiko’s answers, Ken then was able to make a comparison of the symbol for creation in the West with how it is symbolized in the East by recalling his knowledge of the Japanese religion known as Shintorism. From this interaction, it is easy to see that as group participants read and talk together they make connections to various forms of cultural knowledge. It is this unique capacity of Bible study –its status as a dialogical event of production – that allows participants to benefit educationally as they learn to compare and contrast varying cultures, which in turn deepens their understanding of the Bible text.

Second, when participants try to understand the English Bible texts, they do not solely perform literal translation of the English language into their native language of Japanese. Rather, they are often processing information at the level of values and world-views, which is a skill not easily acquired even in formal educational settings. This kind of interaction happened especially when participants were engaged in discussing controversial concepts such as oppression which the following interaction between the pastor, Hiro, Satomi, Ken and Masa illustrates.

P: Can anyone think of an example of some oppressed people?

H: China.

S: Is *discriminated against* the same?

K: Stronger than discriminating.

P: It’s a bit stronger. Yes. So it’s not just like an action. It’s a constant way of life. Everything about their life is made difficult.

S: Mentally as well.

- P: Yeah. Mentally, physically... economically.
- K: But that is only the minority, not the majority!
- M: That is the key problem of democracy in our world today. Democracy values high the majority. This idea is not fair because it means there is no justice for minority people. Their voices are never heard.
- P: Yeah. So we have a concept here that God is a God for the oppressed people. So this is a large branch of theology called liberation theology. (May 26, 2016)

As a group, after the participants have read the Bible text in English, they went through the process of transferring and articulating the concepts they have encountered in English into their native language. Satomi checked with the pastor to make sure she was understanding the meaning of *oppressed* correctly because she had learned its synonym, *discriminated against*, before. Ken answered Satomi's question after evaluating what the two concepts mean based on his personal knowledge of them from the media. Satomi then added to the pastor's explanation of *oppressed*, drawing on her personal experience as she was feeling stressed because she was having difficult relationships at work at that time. Ken expressed his opinion that the minority in society should be valued as much as the majority, which Masa supported. Consequently, Masa also expressed his world-view that democracy does not guarantee justice for all. It is important to notice here that each participant expressed their opinion in the above conversation in connection to either their personal value or world-view, which is a unique characteristic to the type of discussions that happen in a Bible study class. Participants were able to engage in such higher-level thinking naturally because the concepts they were discussing were relevant to their own interests and life experiences.

### *Social Benefits*

People who share a religion come together by choice in order to be actively engaged in the enhancement and enactment of their social lives on various levels in small groups. This happens primarily in and through the act of collective reading.

In terms of social benefits, group Bible reading is best understood as a hermeneutic activity which group participants perform with Biblical texts. What happens in Bible study is not to stay in Bible study but most certainly informs the logic and decision making of participants as they leave the group setting to assume their roles in their homes and society. One of the participants, Daigo, revealed how he tries to live the Bible in his daily life. He explained,

I don't read the Bible because I want to get some knowledge. No, I didn't read Bible like that. I read Bible because I want to apply the words into my daily life as a Christian. Well, maybe this is only partially true. But that's not the only reason why I read Bible. It's because many times I find that I cannot judge what to do on my own. So many things I don't know how, I don't know what I should do. At times like that I would think about what the Bible says. I might not know the solution after reading the Bible, but because the Bible is the Word of God, I think about it. Then I feel I am one step closer to overcoming the problem, or minimizing the problem. I think about what the Bible says. If the Bible says this then I should do this, because I cannot figure out whether something is good or bad sometimes. So I follow God. I believe Jesus is the way. (interview, July 7, 2016)

Similarly, Rikako is a believer in following God's teachings. When I asked her

how she felt about attending Bible study meetings, she said,

It's quite educational to me especially that the Bible tells us to enjoy this world that we live in now. And of course we should feel God's presence in life. What I mean by feel is that we have to have respect for God and worship God. God teaches us to enjoy the world we are enjoying ourselves in now. So we should always think about how to make the world a better place. We are the ones who are responsible for making the world healthy. (interview, July 14, 2016)

Comparing interview data of all participants, Daigo and Rikako's attitude regarding the teachings in the Bible is generalizable to other participants. They both expressed their understanding of God's love and guidance and are determined to be a good member of their family and society by carrying out God's teachings. Without question, group Bible study is an event defined by the interaction between a group of readers and a text. For this religious group of people who gather weekly for a specific purpose, it is obvious that Bible texts are not read only to be forgotten. Rather, these texts serve as guides to their action as they are embedded in their lives.

In the EFL context of Japan, EBT group Bible study allows non-native English speakers to interact with theological content in a nonthreatening and encouraging community. The fact is that the EBT classroom exists to supply non-native English speakers the language necessary to connect English theological content both to their own selves and their learning community through communication. It is a context where participants feel positive about the classroom atmosphere and questions are welcomed as they constitute necessary

milestones on the path to proficiency. The following interaction among the study participants regarding the usage of an unfamiliar word illustrates such a supportive community. The whole class (P = Pastor, M = Masa, K = Ken, H = Hiro, A = Akiko, S = Satomi, R = Rikako, Y = Yuki, T = Tatsuya; E = Everyone) engaged in this conversation.

S: I want to know what is the meaning of 'at the gate of daughter of Zion'.

P: 'The daughter of Zion' is a fancy way of saying Jerusalem. The city as a gate to go in and out. So this person is going to go to the gate where everybody can see him and listen to him, and he is going to sing praises and recount the story.

S: Why daughter?

P: Sometimes places or boats or things like that they have a female name.

M: Why not brother, why sister?

E: [laugh]

A: I have no idea.

P: Well yeah, I see. Well, they still use this in today's language. The pronoun *she* is used to refer to unanimated objects like a nice car.

R: Yeah yeah yeah!

A & T: そう! < *that's right* >

Y: I think so. Ship we use *she*.

K & H: うん。 < that makes sense > (June 30, 2016)

In the above interaction, both Satomi and Masa were not afraid of asking follow-up questions to the pastor's explanation to the original question. In addition, Akiko was not afraid to admit orally to the whole class that she did not have the knowledge to answer Masa's question. She voiced her thoughts anyway in order

to join in the conversation. Rikako showed excitement orally when she finally grasped the concept of how the pronoun *she* is used. Even Yuki joined the conversation by providing an example of how the pronoun can be used, despite the fact that he was often known as a rather quiet existence in class. All in all the atmosphere surrounding this conversation was positive, with everyone laughing and being proactive in asking and answering questions. This atmosphere encouraged each other to speak out, especially at the end when Ken and Hiro responded to Yuki's participation in the conversation by showing positive acknowledgement to his opinion.

In sum, this small group provided a place for teaching, for questions to be asked, and issues to be discussed, without the fear of judgment or rejection. Moreover, the act of self-disclosure performed by Akiko is believed to bring an increase in self-awareness and social awareness. This is supported by modern psychological and sociological research, where findings point to what is called an enhanced drive that is better performed through "mere presence" or "evaluation apprehension" coming from within the group (Bunton, 2014). Because most of the participants in the Bible study group are over retirement age, a place such as this small Bible study group where they can assume a sense of belonging through socializing with others on a regular basis is believed to be beneficial to their social well-being.

## **Discussion**

From a religious perspective, group Bible study is an event dominated by two forms of social practice: reading and communication. The reading that takes place, as well as the talk surrounding that reading, is not a passive affair. A Bible study group does not simply take up their various texts, discuss them, and forget their impact until the next meeting or some random, future encounter with

the same text. In fact, the type of reading done by a Bible study group speaks to a dynamic relationship between text and action. The interaction that takes place between Bible study participants and their texts is productive, informing the worldview of these readers and their ways of being and acting in the world as they live their lives as spouses, parents, employers, employees, consumers, and citizens.

On top of the social benefits of having the determination to carry out God's teachings of love and forgiveness, as well as gaining a sense of belonging in a supportive community, the participants for this study also benefited educationally from their gatherings. In the EFL context in Japan, the implementation of an EBT teaching framework which is inherently cross-cultural allows participants to acquire skills for producing knowledge through cultural comparisons, and also make connections of new concepts with their own values and world-views to gain an in-depth understanding of the concepts. These characteristics supply EBT both its importance and its most exciting possibilities, as it enables people from every culture into global theological discourse.

### **Teaching Implications**

Learning English specifically for biblical and theological studies better serves students when it is geared to their specialized needs and uses of the language and content, and taught in a manner that is appropriate to their local context. Because EBT is based on the needs of its learners, instruction can take many forms and rely heavily on teachers. However, as varying as it can be, nonetheless, it is important for teachers to consider the following four issues when creating an EBT curriculum.

#### *Student Needs*

The needs of EBT students vary across contexts. In an academic

setting, it is important for students to comprehend the meaning of a passage written for a native-English speaker when reading theological texts such as a Bible. In addition, they must understand the meaning of general academic vocabulary, as well as specific theological and biblical vocabulary. For small Bible study groups, however, this need of academic competence is minimal. Rather, EBT small religious gatherings should aim to utilize a specific type of English which relies on content-based English instruction (Flowerdew and Peacock, 2001), wherein the focus rests on the teaching of content or information in the language being learned with little or no direct or explicit effort to teach the language itself separately from the content being taught.

#### *Learning in the Student's Own Culture*

The more personally a student engages in the learning of theology, the more meaningful it becomes. This process serves as the foundation for the theological teaching approach. However, as students move into the realm of communicating personal thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and the like, the classroom may then transform into a very uncomfortable place (Griffiths, 2008) due to differences to teaching approach across cultures. For example, Japanese students seldom feel comfortable enough to voice their opinion directly and openly in front of others due to their experience of schooling being the passive acquisition of knowledge. The EBT teacher must therefore be sensitive in implementing unfamiliar methods of teaching to students, especially with students new to a communicative classroom. After all, students' reactions to unfamiliar methods of teaching can take a strongly negative form as theology is something rather personal to them.

#### *Role of the Teacher or Facilitator*

The role of the teacher or facilitator has extensive impacts on what happens in an EBT classroom or Bible study group from week to week. In many



ways, the EBT teacher is primarily a facilitator, as the learners' needs shape the course of each lesson. However, this might not be the case if the facilitator is over authoritative. How influential is the facilitator's words compared to the other group members? The fact is that how the facilitator structures the group meetings more or less signals group participants what they should prioritize and expect from the experience of meeting together. Also, the facilitator is charged with managing how group conversations unfold. For this reason, it is necessary that the teacher or facilitator has good conversation management skills.

## **Conclusion**

This study attempted to uncover the benefits of participation in a Christian group in the EFL context of Japan around the use of tape-recording and transcription, supplemented by the instruments of observation and interviews. Group English Bible study was most fruitfully understood as a vital social institution for its participants, rooted in the processes of collective reading and inter-subjective dialogue. Through the weekly exchanges that occurred among participants about Bible texts, the continuities which provide EFL Bible study group participants with social and education benefits were readily observable.

The arguments I pursued in this study are presented in the context of group interactions as individual participants transformed into engaged social beings. The fact that participants come from a variety of backgrounds should strengthen my overall claim that English bible study is both educationally and socially beneficial to its participants in an EFL context. Although as a word of caution, it is also possible for the EBT approach to introduce power issues into the learning experience in the case participants do not possess the same level of English proficiency. In extreme cases, it can even serve to elevate those who

posses English proficiency and suppress those who do not, as English study is often a privilege of the elite in many Asian cultures. As such, the influence of the difference in English proficiency among participants deserves further investigate, which this study did not look into, and thus deem to be its limitation.

With this study, I hope to have drawn attention to a significant yet largely unexamined interdisciplinary religious phenomenon of English group Bible study in the hope of encouraging other scholars to contribute their own research efforts. Further studies on the same subject should be concerned with developing culturally-appropriate methods of group facilitation and effective EBT teaching.

## References

- Becker, P. E. (1999). *Congregations in conflict: Cultural models of local religious life*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bunton, P. (2014). 300 years of small groups--the European church from Luther to Wesley. *Christian Education Journal*, 11(1), 88-106.
- Davis, T. F., & Womack, K. (2002). *Formalist criticism and reader-response theory*. New York: Palgrave.
- Dudley-Evans, T., & St. John, M. (1998). *Developments in ESP: A multi-disciplinary approach*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Eiesland, N. L. (2000). *A particular place: Urban restructuring and religious ecology in a southern exurb*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Fish, S. E. (1980). *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Flowerdew, J., & Peacock, M. (2001). *Research perspectives on English for academic purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Griffiths, C. (2008). *Lessons from good language learners*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications.
- Hatch, J. A. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in education settings*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Hutchinson, T., & Waters, A. (1987). *English for specific purposes*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Lawson, K. E. (2006). A band of sisters: The impact of long-term small group participation:

- Forty years in a women's prayer and bible study group. *Religious Education*, 101(2), 180-203.
- Mullins, M. R. (2003). *Handbook of Christianity in Japan*. Boston: Brill.
- Pierson, C., & Bankston, W. (2013). English for bible and theology: Understanding and communicating theology across cultural and linguistic barriers. *Teaching Theology & Religion*, 16(1), 33-49.
- Woodruff, L. C. (2013, March). *English Language Teaching in Theological Contexts Pergason K. B. (Ed.)*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2010. [Review of the book *English language teaching in theological contexts*, by Pergason K.B. (Ed.)] *TESOL Journal* 4(1), 200.