

How to Start an English as a Second Language (ESL) Outreach Ministry In Your Church

Introduction

With a sense of great challenge, we recently embarked on a new journey--starting an English as a Second Language (ESL) outreach ministry in our predominantly Caucasian, English-speaking church in the Kansas City metropolitan area. We, along with a handful of others, felt a burden to reach the unchurched, non-English-speaking population living near our church. We are now in the second year of this ministry and have learned much from our experiences. Our ESL program has served over 400 non-English-speaking students representing 30 nations and 18 diverse languages and dialects. We are excited to see how God has blessed the ministry and enabled several of the ESL students to become a vital part of the congregation. We want to challenge and enable you to engage in this type of ministry in your own community.

Deciding Whether ESL Is A Useful Outreach Tool For Your Church

In deciding whether ESL will be a useful outreach tool for your church, first consider the location of your church and the demographics of the people in the surrounding area. Whether your church is located in an urban center, a suburban community, or a rural area, there is likely some need for ESL instruction. Begin to explore the demographics by asking questions of community leaders, social service personnel, apartment managers, business owners, library personnel, and pastors in the local area. These individuals can clearly validate the need for ESL services and give you worthy suggestions about how to best reach the audience in your area. If your church is in the Nazarene denomination, Nazarene Headquarters Information Technology and Research Services can assist you in locating demographic information for the population in your immediate area.

Next, consider the makeup of your own congregation. Is your current congregation comprised of a multicultural audience? You may already have many key resource people who can help you reach out to the community. Even if your congregation isn't very diverse, ESL may still be a great outreach ministry for you. If you and your congregation are committed to reaching out to those beyond the doors of your church, you have exactly what it takes to get started.

Third, we suggest doing a little research to seek out other ESL programs in your community or in areas with similar demographics. Find out who else is engaged in this ministry. Find out how and why they are approaching the task. Visit existing programs in your area. Observe the classes and talk with the administrators and teachers. Like-minded people engaged in similar services, and ministries are often happy to share their successes and failures.

Planning For An ESL Program

As you begin planning for your ESL program, there are several key issues that you need to address. These include the following:

- **Define Your Mission**

As you begin, you need to have a clear mission in mind. What is the specific purpose of your program? Is it solely to teach English to others? Is it to provide a social service to your community? Is it to evangelize the lost? Spend some time praying about the direction your ministry should take. This is vital since your mission will ultimately steer every decision you make.

- **Find A Capable Administrative Director**

The Administrative Director will play a vital role in starting and sustaining the program. The success of your ministry may depend largely upon whom you select for this role. The Administrative Director will wear a number of hats. Some of his or her duties might include ordering the curriculum, recruiting and training teachers, enrolling students, maintaining data on students, arranging for special guests, arranging refreshments, making announcements, planning parties, substituting as teacher, and reporting to the pastor and congregation. Because these tasks take a significant amount of time, the Administrative Director should not serve as a lead teacher if possible.

- **Find A Strong Lead Teacher(s)**

Find at least one lead teacher per level that can help with curriculum selection, teacher training, classroom methodology, and student placement. It is ideal to find a lead teacher with formal teaching training and experience; however, this is not absolutely necessary. If a formally trained teacher is not available, look to your experienced Sunday School teachers, Bible study leaders, or small group facilitators. These individuals likely know how to plan a lesson, lead a group in various learning exercises, and evaluate whether the audience understands the instruction.

- **Recruit A Team Of Teachers**

Once you have an Administrative Director and a Lead Teacher in place, begin recruiting other teachers. Post a teaching invitation in the church worship folders and/or newsletters. Make oral announcements in Sunday School and in services. You can always start with a small number of teachers and recruit additional teachers as your program grows. Start with at least two teachers even if you have only one initial class of students. It would be helpful to have no more than 15 students per class. Using a team-teaching approach has some significant advantages. First, you'll have a built-in substitute if the lead teacher must be gone. Secondly, you'll have a helper for small group dialogues and activities. Finally, helpers can make the teachers feel supported and confident about what they are doing. Contrary to popular belief, ESL teachers do not need to be foreign language speakers to be successful with non-English-speaking students. Since the intent of the ESL classes is to encourage students to use English, it may actually be beneficial if the teachers speak only English.

- **Select And Order Curriculum**

There are many existing ESL curriculums and materials on the market. However, remember that the curriculum you choose should complement your program's mission. Think about whether you want to use strictly Bible-based products, such as bilingual Bible studies, strictly academic language materials, or a combination of both. Picture dictionaries and themed materials work especially well for beginning students since they often need to develop a basic English vocabulary. Intermediate students are often interested in more stringent academic materials that include reading, writing, speaking, and listening exercises. Advanced students not only want to address reading, writing, speaking, and listening, but also want to perfect their formal English. They often request more intensive grammar, writing, and comprehension exercises since they need these higher-level skills in their jobs. Many different types of curriculum can be effective. You simply need to experiment and see what works with the students you are serving.

The Global English Series (available through Nazarene Publishing House) is ideal if you decide to incorporate Bible study or Christian training in your program. The Global English Series presents Biblical and theological concepts in a simple manner using easy-to-read-and-understand language. The Global English Series books feature highlighted vocabulary, basic phonetic/pronunciation guides, a full glossary, and specific teaching helps. The lessons are short and well-suited for oral interaction.

The ALTA ESL English Language Development Resource Center can also be a valuable place to look. This resource center is the largest source of secular English language learning materials in the world. You can access the entire catalog on-line at www.altaesl.com or call toll free at 1-800-ALTA/ESL.

- **Decide Upon The Duration Of The Classes**

You need to decide upon the length of the individual class sessions. Two-hour sessions once a week worked well for us. You will want to allow time for opening announcements (10 minutes), a refreshment break (15 minutes), and plenty of time for group activities. Evening or Saturday sessions are ideal since many adult students are working during the week. Both teachers and students commonly ask how long the classes will last. Thus, even if you want your classes to be ongoing, it is helpful to frame them with exact beginning and ending dates. We found 10 or 12-week sessions to work well.

- **Determine Whether You Will Charge**

We've encountered diverse opinions on the question of whether or not to charge students for the classes, and there are valid rationales for both positions. If you charge, you can create a small operating budget for your program and will more likely attract students who are serious about attending on a consistent basis. We suggest a small fee that will cover basic curriculum and supplies. If you do not charge, you can be certain you are not eliminating anyone simply on the basis of

financial resources, but you will need to find funds for curriculum and supplies from another source.

• **Provide Orientation And Training Opportunities For Teachers**

Hold orientation/training sessions for newly recruited teachers shortly before the classes begin. At these sessions provide some basic cross-cultural awareness training. Consider your target audience and determine which cultures are most likely to be represented. Lead the teachers in exploring background information, history, religion, general attitudes, personal appearance, customs, courtesies, gestures, foods, typical family traditions, lifestyle, recreation, holidays, commerce, government, economy, communication, education, and health. You might include cultural topics lists, cultural simulation activities, and cultural dialogue exercises. To access helpful on-line resources see the CIA World Fact Book and LonelyPlanet.com.

Use the training session to introduce the basic structure for the classes. Talk through how each session will proceed. Decide who will teach which levels. Decide who will take the role of lead teacher in each class. Pre-think some of the challenges the first class might present.

Use the final part of the training to equip both experienced and inexperienced teachers with ideas for instruction. Be sure to explain the lesson planning process. Introduce the teachers to a host of strategies and assessment tools for the classroom. Model a few lessons and activities for teachers. Put together a teaching tools kit with classroom resources that can be easily borrowed and adapted. The kit might include assessment instruments, lesson plan structures, autobiographical activities, comprehension exercises, dialogue exercises, dictation exercises, environmental print activities, flash card activities, games, idioms and figures of speech activities, ideas for questioning, read-aloud exercises, common sight word lists, cultural studies resources, vocabulary exercises, and word lists. This kit will be a valuable resource for experienced and inexperienced teachers alike.

• **Advertise The Classes**

Several weeks before your start date, advertise the classes to the community in both English and Spanish (or whatever language best represents your audience). Check with local businesses to see if they will allow you to post notices about the classes. They are often willing to do so if the classes are a free service to the community. Contact local apartment managers to see if they will put your notices in their newsletters to residents. Check with local libraries to see if they have literature racks where you can put your flyers. Post a large banner on your church property if your church sits near a highway or frequently traveled street. Send notices home with your congregation so they can post them anywhere they have contacts. With a little effort on your part, you can advertise with minimal cost.

- **Pre-register Students**

Once you advertise the classes, the church is likely to start receiving calls for additional information. It is wise to select a certain person to field or return these calls. It is good to have a pre-recorded message in Spanish (or whatever second language is predominant in your community) in case telephone communication is difficult. Another option is to have a prepared cue card that the church staff can read even if they do not speak a second language. It is helpful to register individuals as they call or stop by the church. If you can get basic student information (name, address, phone number), you can follow up with these individuals before the classes start. Keeping basic pre-registration information can also help you judge approximately how many students to expect in the classes.

Getting ESL Classes Underway

- **Establish Class Levels**

Even if you start small, it is wise to have at least two levels of adult classes so you can meet the needs of both beginners and more advanced students. Three class levels (beginning, intermediate, and advanced) works well. You might allow students to self-select classes, or you could administer a basic assessment tool to help you determine student placement. We have found self-selection to work very well. If students are uncertain which level is appropriate, you can ask a few basic assessment questions to help them decide. Some examples are:

- Can you understand what I am saying?
- How long have you been speaking English?
- Have you studied English in school? If so, for how long?
- Do you use spoken and/or written English in your job?
- What can you tell me about your family?
- What can you tell me about this picture [any common scene]?

Students who have never studied English, who don't understand the meaning of simple spoken questions or can't answer you in simple English, should likely start in a beginning class. Students who have studied English in some type of setting, understand basic questions, and can answer with conversational responses should try the intermediate class. Students who have studied English in a formal setting, are using both spoken and written English at work or in the community, and can communicate readily in response to questions should try the advanced class.

- **Plan For Child Care**

You may find that many adult students bring their children to class whether you advertise children's classes or not. Thus, you might want to take advantage of this built-in opportunity to minister to the young people by starting children's classes or activities. Your children's classes could be academic in nature, but certainly do not have to be. They might resemble Sunday School or Bible School classes. Nursery care will likely be a necessity as well. If you do not have a paid nursery assistant at your church, you might wish to check with local high school language teachers or National Honor Society sponsors. We found

many high school students looking for opportunities to practice their language skills and earn their community service hours in cross-cultural service.

- **Consider Transportation Issues**

For some students, finding transportation to and from classes on a consistent basis may be challenging. You might consider finding volunteer(s) and/or other students who can provide rides if necessary.

- **Plan A Brief Time For Announcements And Prayer**

Start each session with a brief time for opening announcements and prayer, if possible. We selected this model for several reasons. First, we want the students to feel comfortable in the sanctuary since we hope to invite them to become part of our regular congregation. Therefore, we conduct this introductory session in the sanctuary every week. Second, we want the students to learn more about the ministries of our church, so we invite a church ministry leader to join us and share some brief information in each opening session. Finally, we want to involve students in a time of prayer, so at the opening sessions, we consistently pray for the classes, the students, the teachers, and special requests. Our opening sessions are delivered in English and translated into Spanish because our community base is largely Spanish-speaking.

- **Distribute A Basic Information Sheet**

Distribute a basic English/Spanish information sheet on the first day of class to acquaint students with the program, basic procedures, and key contact persons. Encourage the students to pass the information sheet to friends, family, and acquaintances that might be interested in attending the classes. You will likely find that by the second or third week, your program is growing significantly. It's wise to keep a good supply of the information sheets on hand since many students join the program later.

- **Maintain Flexibility**

The first evening, in particular, may seem a little hectic, so don't be alarmed if things don't go quite as smoothly as you might have liked. Students and teachers will soon learn the routines and find creative ways to communicate with one another in spite of language barriers. It is important for teachers to realize that they may need to exercise some flexibility in their lesson planning as well. In an informal academic setting like ESL classes, students may drop out, join late, or miss several sessions and return at a later date. Teachers should keep this in mind as they plan lessons. It is helpful to construct self-contained lessons that do not rely too heavily on previous lessons. Teachers should also be aware of the cultural differences that exist so they do not become frustrated or frustrate students with overly rigid expectations of how the lessons and interactions should proceed.

- **Plan Time For Refreshments And Fellowship**

Plan time for students and teachers to snack, fellowship, and get to know one another informally. Eating together is a vital component of building friendships and trust in many cultures. Part of the mission in this type of outreach ministry is

to get to know students on a personal level and learn about their personal and spiritual needs. As we worked with our students, we realized the intense loneliness and isolation many were feeling, particularly those who left their families behind and came to the United States to work. For our students, the refreshment session became a weekly place to build support frameworks and social bridges. If you don't have a formal budget, remember that refreshments don't have to be elaborate. They can be as simple as coffee and cookies. Teachers or members of your congregation might take turns bringing the refreshments.

- **Follow The Classes With Teacher Debriefing And Prayer**

At the conclusion of each class session, bring teachers together for a few moments of sharing. They often have many exciting and encouraging things to report. They may have some prayer requests to share as well. This debriefing time allows teachers to support one another, gain ideas from each other, and learn about any important announcements the Administrator Director may need to share. Conclude this debriefing session with a time of prayer for students and the ministry.

- **Provide Social Service Information**

Know your community resources and be prepared to address basic questions about social services, health care, schooling, and legal matters. We quickly learned that ESL students new to the United States had many questions and readily posed them to their teachers as soon as they felt comfortable doing so. Obviously, the list of possible questions could be endless, and it would be futile to try to anticipate them all. However, teachers should be aware of some of the commonly posed questions:

- How do I gain citizenship?
- How do I enroll my child in school?
- How do I obtain a copy of legal paperwork?
- How do I obtain health care?
- Where do I go to register a vehicle?
- How do I apply for employment?

You might want to put together a basic fact sheet with contact information for vital social service agencies in your area. You might also speak with your own congregation about any types of social support services they might be able to provide. For example, the nurses in our congregation hosted a free health fair for our ESL students. This proved to be a very successful relationship-building tool.

- **Plan A Party**

Plan a culminating time of fellowship at the conclusion of each ESL cycle. You might try an ethnic potluck. Students are often willing to bring cuisine representative of their own countries. Encourage students to bring their families to this event. Let them plan some of the entertainment by sharing songs and games. Give them a completion certificate or some type of small gift to encourage them in their studies. Invite them to pre register for the next class

cycle. The final party is also a wonderful time to celebrate Christmas, Easter, or other religious holidays. We have shown the *JESUS* film at the concluding party and prayed with seekers. Plan whatever type of event meets your needs, but don't forget the importance of having fellowship together.

Sustaining Your ESL Program And Helping It Thrive

• Build A Budget

You can start an ESL program with very few resources. However, if you plan to sustain an ongoing ministry, it is helpful to build at least a small, long-term budget to meet the inevitable expenses you will incur if you make the decision not to charge. Expenses will include curriculum, supplies, refreshments, nursery care providers, certificates, and final party expenses.

• Provide Continued Discipleship & Mentoring

If your experience mirrors ours, you will find that some students who come to the ESL classes will gradually begin to attend the other services and activities of the church. Thus, it is important that they feel welcomed and supported by other Christian brothers and sisters. Devise a system to link these new faith seekers with mature Christian disciplers in your own congregation.

• Provide Cultural Awareness Training For Your Own Congregation

As you attempt to disciple these new seekers, you may find it useful to provide some basic cultural awareness training for your own congregation. The congregation might find it difficult or even threatening to try to overcome language and social barriers if you don't help to bridge that gap. As your congregation becomes more ethnically diverse, you might even try some foreign language classes (e.g. Spanish) with interested members of your congregation.

• Incorporate Cross-Cultural Elements Into All Aspects Of The Church

You can begin to reach out to the needs of this diverse audience through a number of mechanisms. You might want to consider providing translation in regular services. This can be done through a traditional translator or electronic translation equipment. You might want to incorporate a cross-cultural approach in the music. You could start a Spanish Bible Study or Sunday School class. There are many ways to be sure these individuals are incorporated into the life of the church. We encourage you to experiment and find the strategies that work for your congregation.

• Invite Your Congregation To Be A Part Of The Ministry

Finally, invite your congregation to be a vital part of the ESL ministry through providing refreshments, providing financial donations and providing prayerful support.

--Cort and Karen Miller
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