

“SO GREAT WAS THE POWER OF THE LANGUAGE...”

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In my personal study and pondering about how we at Brigham Young University-Idaho might truly advance the scholarship of learning and teaching, I recently have been focusing upon the relationship between language and learning. I have long been fascinated by the linguistic relativity hypothesis proposed by Benjamin Lee Whorf. Whorf basically suggests that:

the background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade. Formulation of ideas is not an independent process, strictly rational in the old sense, but is part of a particular grammar and differs, from slightly to greatly, between different grammars (Whorf, 212-214).

Thus, according to Whorf, the dominant language we know and use both facilitates and constrains our cognitive and affective abilities.

Interestingly, the role of language in learning and teaching also has been addressed by President Ezra Taft Benson. In his classic address in the April 1987 general conference entitled “The Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants,” President Benson emphasized:

It is important that in our teaching we make use of the language of holy writ. Alma said, “I... do command you in the language of him who hath commanded me” (Alma 5:61).

The words and the way they are used in the Book of Mormon by the Lord should become our source of understanding and should be used by us in teaching gospel principles (84).

The implication of President Benson's statement seems quite clear.

**We should use
the language of
the scriptures.**

We should use the language of the scriptures to teach the doctrine and principles of the restored gospel. Any other approach will result in less effective learning and teaching.

As I considered these two seemingly unrelated propositions, an interesting series of thoughts came into my mind.

Thought #1 — If effective and spiritually powerful gospel learning and teaching are facilitated by the use of scriptural language, then perhaps in like manner we at Brigham Young University-Idaho can and must use the language of the gospel to facilitate our understanding of learning and teaching processes.

Thought #2 — We at Brigham Young University-Idaho will not accomplish what we are destined to accomplish if we rely exclusively upon the conventional language used in secular literatures to describe and discuss the processes of learning and teaching. We must be conversant with both the language of the gospel and the language of our respective disciplinary literatures.

Thought #3 — We at Brigham Young University-Idaho have a distinctive opportunity and responsibility to pursue this path.

I am not suggesting in any way that we neglect our acquaintance with and mastery of the literatures of our disciplines. Each of us as faculty members must be familiar with and conversant in the language of scholarship. But I am suggesting that we must build upon the traditional concepts and language of scholarship and benefit from the truths and language of the gospel. If we indeed are spiritually and intellectually bilingual, then our gospel perspective and “restoration eyes” can combine with our academic training and enable us to ask questions and discern patterns and processes that other scholars simply may not have the “eyes to see” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 136:22). Only by appropriately using both gospel and scholarly vocabularies can we at Brigham Young University-Idaho ever hope to move to a richer and deeper level of understanding concerning effective learning and teaching.

I next tried to think of examples of questions about or approaches to learning and teaching which are enriched by and through gospel language. For instance:

- What are the implications of *agency* (*Doctrine and Covenants* 101:78) and being an *agent* (*Doctrine and Covenants* 64:29) in the learning and teaching processes?
- What does it mean to be *anxiously engaged* (*Doctrine and Covenants* 58:27) in the processes of learning and teaching?
- How do both students and teachers become *anxiously engaged* (*Doctrine and Covenants* 58:27) in the learning process?
- How can a teacher most effectively help a student to *learn from his or her own experience* (*Doctrine and Covenants* 122:7)?
- What is the role of the spiritual gift of *discernment* (*Doctrine and Covenants* 46:23) in both learning and teaching?
- What can we learn from Nephi about “*having great desires to know*” (1 Nephi 2:16)?
- What is the role of *plainness* (2 Nephi 25:4) in teaching and learning?

- What is the process for obtaining “*knowledge upon knowledge*” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 42:61)?
- How do we seek learning by both *study* and *faith* (*Doctrine and Covenants* 88:118)?

My purpose in presenting these illustrations is simply to suggest how we might *begin* to pursue this path. Obviously, the best questions are yet to be posed.

Einstein is reported to have said: “The problems that exist in the world today cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them” (Cole’s Quotables, On-line Database). I believe we at Brigham Young University-Idaho have a truly unique resource—the revealed truth and language of the restored gospel—which can help us move to a new level of thinking about the processes of learning and teaching. And this unparalleled resource can help us think about and ask and do what has not previously been thought about or asked or done. Thus, the languages of the gospel and of scholarship can and should be mutually invigorating, and we as an institution will play a pioneering role in demonstrating the simultaneous use of and synergistic relationship between these two vital languages. ∞

WORKS CITED

- Benson, Ezra Taft. “The Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants,” *Ensign*, May 1987.
- Whorf, B.L. *Language, Thought, and Reality*. J.B. Carroll, ed. Cambridge and New York: MIT - Wiley, 1956.