

# Can Christian Love Overcome Prejudice in the ESL Workplace?

A Theological Analysis by Denis Jenssen

## INTRODUCTION



In June of 1989, I began working for the Kilmartin Company as a teacher of English as a Second Language in the Workplace. Kilmartin employed 32 teachers in sites throughout eastern Massachusetts. I taught State employees in Boston, Charlestown, and Springfield; housekeeping personnel in hospitals in Brighton, Chinatown, and Cambridge; and shift workers, clerical workers, and computer operators in banks in Boston, small companies in Woburn and Medford, and large companies in Stow and Tyngsboro. Our goal was the expeditious assimilation of non-English speaking people into mainstream business culture (attached picture is taken from [www.lcc.edu/langskills/english](http://www.lcc.edu/langskills/english)).

## STATEMENT OF APPARENT PROBLEM

In September of '89, I was assigned by Kilmartin to tutor Don S. Lee (not his real name). Our goal was to “increase effectiveness of written communications” for the sake of Lee’s performance as a shift supervisor. Specifically, The Kilmartin Company contracted, over the space of 40 hours, at a schedule agreed to by teacher and student, to carry out the following Individualized Learning Plan:

To increase the correctness of his writing, Don will complete a linguistics grammar course. This approach uses formulas to show the logic behind English structure.

To increase paragraph effectiveness, Don will analyze 7 types of paragraphs. Dan will identify paragraph structure and transition words. Finally, he will write an example of each paragraph type within the context of his work.

To improve the overall effectiveness of memos and reports, Don will learn planning and organizing techniques presented in The Kilmartin Company's business writing course. He will apply information to work-related writing by editing reports and memos Dan brings to class.

Lee had moved from Korea to this country with his family at the age of five. He had successfully completed a public school education here and had gone on to a New England college to earn a degree in Engineering. When I met him, Lee was employed by a manufacturing company north of Boston, MA. He was an intelligent and engaging individual, whose frustration is evident in his written understanding of why he was taking the course with me.

I try "damn" hard, but there are grammatical errors, such as errors in tenses, singular vs. plural, sentence arrangement, and the correct use of the articles. [I want to see] Improvements in the items listed.

Fear only in getting a memo back from my boss with red markers pointing out the errors.

## **STATEMENT OF LATENT PROBLEM**

As I worked with Lee, it appeared that his difficulties with written English were leading him and his supervisors toward an impasse. A casual, seemingly well-intentioned offer to help Lee with his written memos and reports had resulted in the appearance of a subtle tone of superiority and impatience in the receiver (Lee's supervisor) and embarrassment in the sender (Lee). Furthermore, Lee's sense of being a full participant in production planning was eroding. Lee had begun to see his supervisors as being unwilling even to consider his creative ideas for saving time and labor—an experiment to

extend product shelf life; a change in management structure; a new computer to track all aspects of production and supervision for which he was responsible. Lee's descriptions of his immediate supervisor's and their manager's negative responses to his recommendations suggested something other than Lee's problems with English was becoming an obstacle—possibly unconscious racism.

As an intuitive ESL instructor, that is, untrained, who was routinely given teaching materials and sent on her way, I knew nothing of research on the difficulties of Korean assimilation into the culture of the United States of America. In order to help Lee, I had to resort to my experience as a writer, and much prayer for inspiration. By the time we had reached day eight, near the end of our second month of working together, I was painfully aware that although we were completing all of the required exercises and writing assignments, Lee's written English was not improving sufficiently. In a note to myself, I registered my need to talk with someone to understand Lee's difficulties with organizing written work and moving between Korean and English grammar. In time that would drive me to take Molinsky's course at BU for ESL instructors, but the need was of the moment. Both Lee and his company were losing valuable opportunities and resources. Lee was losing opportunities to be creative; the company was losing the benefits of Lee's creativity.

## **DESCRIPTION OF CONTRACTED RESOLUTION**

One of our stumbling blocks in English was Lee's inability to use articles. On day nine of our working together, I discovered in conversation that Lee had an interest in the Psalms. In fact, his interest was such that he was attending Gordon-Conwell College

in Beverly, MA, to study them. On day ten, therefore, I brought in *The King James Bible* and the *New Revised Standard Bible* and laid them both before him open to Psalms 22 and 23. My hope was that Lee's interest would lead him to compare the two translations with me so closely, for how they used articles, that he would finally understand what I had not yet been able to teach him (attached picture taken from <http://www.thelutheran.org/0109/page9a.html>).

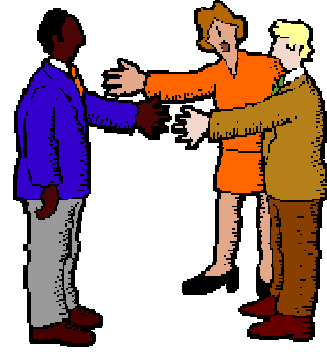


Lee stared at the two Bibles, marveling. He had never before seen or thought of more than one translation of his beloved Psalms. His world of scriptural study was suddenly opened to him in a new and seemingly unsettling way. I could only watch and listen and hope that after what almost looked like shock had passed, we could get back to working on English grammar. We did, of course, but Lee took the two Bibles home in order to study all of the differences in the two translations of the two Psalms.

When we met the following week for our eleventh lesson, Lee's determination to succeed with our Business Writing goal seemed heightened. Since late in September, I had been urging Lee always to assume consent or success in whatever memo he wrote, project he offered, report he compiled. Suddenly, he began to talk about his manager, the man above his immediate supervisor. He saw the man as limited, stupid even, and unwilling to entertain any idea Lee offered, or to listen all the way through Lee's explanations.

I asked Lee to take a different tack with the man. I asked him to think through the man's needs as a manager, to put himself in that role. I asked him to think compassionately about the man, to study how his ideas could help his manager. I asked him to see himself not as his manager's adversary, but as his ally. I asked Lee to write a

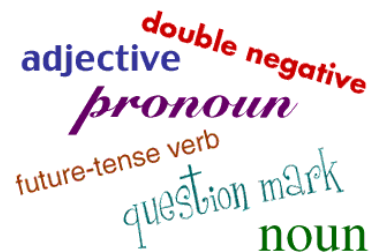
carefully organized and worded proposal, telling why he should have more authority in his job description, and exactly how that would help the manufacturing operation, including savings of time, labor, and expense. I also asked him to believe that he would succeed in persuading



his manager to do what Lee wanted to see their company do (attached picture taken from [http://environment.transportation.org/center\\_products\\_programs/programmatic\\_agreement\\_toolkit/steps.html](http://environment.transportation.org/center_products_programs/programmatic_agreement_toolkit/steps.html)).

Lee worked on his first draft alone. When we met again, rather than correcting his work, I asked questions about it, about his purpose, and about his intention to take the part of his reader. My note on Lee’s proposal says, “Basically this revision identified Lee’s topic sentence and edited out his harangue.” Lee’s comment was that “The planning helped him articulate something he’d been thinking for two years.”

All the same, at the end of day 15, I wrote that Lee still “doesn’t attend to language, spelling, grammar. His only interest is in saying logically exactly what he means.” That was a sign of progress, however. Lee was



now making himself understood. His innovativeness, his ideas for increased efficiency, as well as his larger perspective on the company were being noticed, he reported. Lee agreed to revise the memo he had just shown me by himself (attached picture taken from <http://www.harcourtschool.com/glossary/grammar>).

The following week, I was able to write, “He did it! He whittled two pages into one beautifully by himself. He caught a significant error. He made his reader his ally.”

The memo became known as Lee's Memo on Master Batching. In my final evaluation of Day 16, I noted that "His Master Batching memo was a great success with top level boss."

We began to record Lee reading his written work aloud so that he could hear the sound of his grammar and correct himself. By the time we reached mid-February, and day 19 of his lessons, Lee had a new challenge and a new motivation to write a correct and concise letter. He was trying to buy a house with his wife because of their new baby. He was also wanting to extend his Business English Classes by five sessions. That would not happen, though he admitted that he did not feel sure enough of himself even to volunteer to write a letter for his church. He also worried aloud that his prayers had become self-conscious. What was happening was that Lee was becoming conscious of his English usage, written and spoken too.

We recorded his letter, and Lee heard the only grammatical error he had made. He felt better, and he was able to tell me what thought should become his opening sentence.

## **SUMMARY OF RESOLUTION**

The transformation in Lee's written work, in his confidence and point of view over the course of our 40 hours together was gratifying. 54 days after our last meeting, Lee wrote to me at The Kilmartin Company, saying that he had achieved the three professional goals and one personal one that he had voiced as we worked together. He had a new "IBM PS2 PC sitting right next to my Apple IIe." His company's "management structure was changed in such a way that the other two shift supervisors are

now reporting to me.” “After six months of experiments the management bought my idea to extend the shelf life of some powders to save labor time.” Finally, he wrote that the closing on his new home “is scheduled for April 27<sup>th</sup>.” He was surely on his way.

## **THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF TRANSFORMATION**

Karl Rahner would probably say that I should look to my business writing lessons for the resolution of the impasse between Don Lee and his supervisors (Rahner, p. 88). Unfortunately, I have the letter before me that Lee wrote to me, which shows that he still needed to work on his English grammar. No, I think Lee would have attributed his success to the presence of God in his workplace. Both Lee and I were startled by the event of my bringing the Psalms into our ESL lesson. I remember worrying, in fact, what my employer would think of it. Both of us were pleased that we shared a spiritual perspective, but we were also surprised by the strength of the spirituality we were each experiencing.

I think Lee’s increased dedication to our business writing goal, following on our using the two Bibles, was because he had been opened to the possibility that God also works in the workplace. As beings dependent on God, we are continually opened and made and given to (42). Both Lee and I knew this then. Rahner would surely have explained our knowing it as an aspect of our own transcendence. He would have reminded us repeatedly that it is only in our transcendence that we experience God. He would have made clear to us that in thinking on the meanings of our own lives, and their limitations, we would transcend (20) ourselves. We both already knew that we find God in the world, in each other (52). But I doubt that either of us knew of Rahner in 1989,

and so what Lee did when he returned with the Bibles was choose to take full responsibility for becoming what he experienced himself to be (37). He saw what I was urging in terms of the other's point of view; he saw the technical help I was offering with English; and he saw salvation (39). He saw that its possibility was in the present, in this world (40). Lee became what he was, as he had been given his essence to be.

A curious thing happened on our 20th day of lessons together. We had been working on Lee's letter about the purchase of his house. I have in his letter I referred to earlier that he had just discovered a \$325,000 lien on the house he had offered to buy. Suddenly, I stood up and said in a manner unlike myself that Lee was not to be afraid of the outcome. I had the distinct sense that not I, but something in a dimension adjacent to ours was speaking in me. I looked at Lee. He was sitting before me as though he had seen a ghost. His eyes were wide; his mouth hung open. Would Rahner have considered the event "a special intervention of God" (87)? Would he have explained to us that what I had said by way of whomever was a concretion of the God both Lee and I knew as the very ground of our transcendent relationships with God (89)? We both certainly felt that whatever had happened had a real spiritual basis.



Some years later, I had occasion to call Lee at his company on another matter. I learned that Lee had been hired away from the company Kilmartin contracted with to become Plant Manager of a New Hampshire company. He was free (39). Christian love works.

(Attached picture taken from Tommy Roberts at <http://www.jazzchaser.com/jazzart.html>).



## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Rahner, Karl. *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*. Translated by William V. Dych. New York: Crossroad, 2002.