

THE VISA COURSE

LEADERS'
NOTES



FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

An opportunity to find out
about the Christian faith



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The Visa Course, which comprises Leaders' Notes and Student Notes, is designed to be a flexible tool which can be adapted for a variety of situations but if any substantial changes are made, the name 'Visa' may only be used with the prior written permission of Friends International.

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Quotations from the Bible are taken from the Contemporary English Version, the Good News Bible and the New International Version (1984 Version).



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Introduction

The Visa Course is the result of several years of running such courses in Bournemouth. It has been very much an evolving process with lots of adaptations along the way and we would in no way claim that this is the definitive course for introducing the Christian Faith to international students.

It has been predominantly designed for language students and has also been used effectively with international wives' groups. Although we have had university students attending, the Pre-tasks and language level are geared at those learning English. The length has been largely dictated by the time we can hope to have contact with the average language student. These factors introduce limitations. Clearly, each topic could be a course in itself! We have simply aimed to produce an introduction and an overview which hopefully will be a springboard for further investigation into Christianity. The Course is a topical study not a Bible Study course.

The Visa Course is a joint effort and many individuals have been involved over the years. They have ranged from local pastors to Bible College students, from staff of South Wessex International Student Work (now Friends International Dorset) and in particular a dedicated local team who have developed, taught and helped to revise the course. Nor should we forget the students who have attended courses and whose reactions and comments have helped us to shape the material as it now stands. We are indebted to a church in Oxford for the name 'Visa'.

The course comes with our prayers that God may use it to further the understanding of international students about the Christian Faith and lead many to know Him.

From all those involved at Friends International Dorset

A

GUIDELINES FOR THE USE OF THE VISA COURSE

Introduction

The Visa Course is an opportunity to discover what Christians believe, to discuss and to ask questions in a relaxed atmosphere.

There are three core elements to such a course:

- Food & Socialising
- Input & Teaching
- Feedback & Discussion

We recognize that users of this course will have differing levels of experience both of running courses and of working with international students. We have aimed to offer help for those who have never embarked on such a venture before and also for those more experienced. Please forgive us if some of the information is too basic and take what is helpful for you.

A1. Practical Issues

Some questions for you to ask before you begin a course:

Who should we invite to the course?

The course is written for international students studying English. It is aimed at those of intermediate level or above. You will need to use discretion as to whether a student of a lower language level will be able to cope with the course. (Some pre-intermediate level students may have sufficient spoken English to follow the teaching and discussion). It is designed for those who

are not Christians but have questions about the Christian Faith, those who are not sure if they are Christians and those who are new or recent Christians. It is not intended for those who have been Christians for many years and already know a lot about the Bible and the Christian Faith (In our experience, such students shift the level of discussion and questioning to too high a level).

For how long will the students be available?

Over the years we have progressed from an 8 week to a 9/10 week course as we have become aware of gaps in the course content. We have also adapted the order a little. The present length of course and the topics covered reflect what we have found to work best. Weeks 1–5 cover foundational topics; weeks 6–10 build and develop students' understanding. Some groups may need to miss out one or two weeks of the course; others may have more time and may wish to spend two weeks on one or more of the topics. If 10 weeks is impracticable, one suggestion is to cover one or two topics on a Saturday, perhaps with a social event.

Where will we hold the course?

We have used both a church hall and a home. The latter has several advantages but needs to be big enough to accommodate several groups in different rooms. Accessibility and transport are factors to consider.

What refreshments will we serve?

In some cases, and if people are available to cook, it is appropriate to serve a meal. As we cater for language students who are largely in host families who cook for them, we choose just to provide desserts and drinks. We usually provide a full meal in week 10 (see notes on Final Session). There is great overall value in eating, drinking and socialising together.

Who will give the talks?

Possibilities are staff workers, existing team members, local pastors, Bible College students – in fact anyone who can communicate well to international students and who has the time to help!

There are two views about group leaders being involved in giving talks. Some have found that this can stifle discussion later as the students don't want to disagree with or question the speaker! Locally, we have

not found this an issue and have found that using the local team helps to keep the continuity for speakers and students. Much may depend on your local situation: who is available, the age of speakers, their relationship to students etc. If an 'outside' speaker is used, it is important that they understand the situation they are coming to and ideally attend the week before. We recognize that the Visa Course is also sometimes used in small groups and is led as a discussion group. This is certainly possible but the course is designed to follow the format of a talk followed by discussion groups.

Who will be group leaders?

Again, you can draw from the suggestions above. It needs to be said that Visa Courses are people-intensive and tiring (as well as being very exciting and fulfilling!). This should be borne in mind when selecting helpers, especially if drawing them from those already involved in another weekly student activity. Locally, we run an inter-church course with helpers from different churches.

How will we publicise the course?

We have publicised the course with 'warm' contacts i.e. with those with whom we have already built up a relationship e.g. at an international café. A leaflet has been produced explaining the outline of the course, where it will be and when, subjects to be covered etc. We have explained in the leaflet who it is for and who it is not for. We have also emphasised that students will need a certain level of English to understand the course and the value of attending each week. In this leaflet we invite people to the Introductory Session to hear more about the course, to have a taster of the content and format and to decide whether they would like to take part in the whole course.

A2. Important Points

- The Visa Course format is largely apologetic and 'linear'. However, in places we have also introduced story-telling to illustrate points e.g. in the chapters 'Did Jesus come alive again?' and 'What is a Christian?' Some chapters rely more on one approach, some more on another. This is deliberate, recognizing that different cultures relate more to one approach than another.

- We cannot emphasise enough the importance of illustrations and visual aids to accompany the talks. ‘A picture’s worth a thousand words’ – especially when you are listening in a foreign language! Three chapters in particular (Who is Jesus? Why did Jesus die? Did Jesus come alive again?) lend themselves to using clips of the Jesus video.¹ Each chapter contains suggested illustrations and visual aids. You may wish to add some of your own.
- Prayer is crucial! It is good to aim to pray before and after each session. If team members are involved in transporting students, aim for some of the team to pray before and some after each session. In addition, involve your church or local churches in praying.

A3. Pointers for Speakers and Group Leaders

You are the key people! You will ‘make’ the course for the students through the rapport you establish and your communication skills.

- Build relationships. Occasional meals together or a Saturday social, either in groups or altogether, can help.
- Get to know your students and where they are ‘coming from’ (and not just geographically!).
- Always show respect to those of other faiths. It is not our job to convert people but to present the truth and let the Holy Spirit do His work. Never be negative about other faiths. Rather be positive about your own!
- Watch your language! Avoid evangelical jargon. Be aware of words and expressions which are open to misinterpretation. What does ‘God’ mean to the students in your group?

1. The Jesus video can be viewed at: <http://www.jesusfilmmedia.org>

- Humour is good but can be very cultural. Avoid ‘in-jokes’ understood by other leaders but not the students. Tell jokes against yourself and your nationality rather than that of the students.

I. The Pre-tasks

The purpose is to ‘warm-up’, to get students thinking, to listen for and pre-learn some new vocabulary, to remove barriers to understanding and to better communicate difficult concepts. The exercises should also help students to relax at the beginning of the session. Don’t just read out the exercises. Perhaps do the first one together, then suggest students work in pairs. Leaders should be on hand to help. Give out Student Notes and pens at the beginning of each session.

II. The Talks



Expand and explain the Student Notes

These provide the outline for your talk and the Leaders’ Notes should help you fill them out. We recognise that some speakers will be more experienced than others, but always avoid just reading notes (maybe jot down some headings / bullet points to which you can refer). Most speakers will also want to put their own ‘stamp’ upon the talk. Highlight headings and main points by the use of visuals such as powerpoint, flipchart etc.



Be selective

It is not necessary for every line of the notes to be covered in the talk. E.g. in Week 7 ‘Who is the Holy Spirit?’ we have not always included in the talk the section, ‘Some of the things the Holy Spirit does’, and have moved on to the section on the Trinity at the end. In particular, we would not use every Bible verse to illustrate a section.



Set a time limit

We need to bear in mind that concentration span when listening in another language is quite limited. Realistically, 25 mins is the length of time for the Pre-tasks and the talk but the latter should never be a monologue but include illustration and interaction.



Use lots of visuals

Again we would emphasise the importance and value of as much visual input as possible. We have suggested later some illustrations we have found helpful and you may well want to develop your own. Use personal illustrations: e.g. in the chapter on Prayer, how has God answered prayer for you?



Make talks interactive

Use what language teachers call ‘Concept-Checking Questions’ which clarify whether students have understood a point or not. E.g. after looking at the humanity of Jesus, ask, ‘Did Jesus sometimes feel sad or angry?’



Keep students’ attention

The Student Notes are intended for students to take away and read and perhaps investigate further; they can also be useful for the group discussion times. Opinions vary as to whether it is helpful for students to follow the talk in the books as you speak. You will need to decide this. Ideally they should be looking at you, listening to you and following your explanations. It may be helpful to refer to the books at certain times.



Be sensitive

Some of the chapters end with a challenge. Remember that for some cultures the desire to please a teacher will be very strong and the polite thing to do. Again, allow the Holy Spirit to do the convicting.



Give feedback

Be prepared to critique each other’s talks. We have developed a simple feedback form for this (see Appendix 3). This will help each speaker and also improve communication.

III. The Group Times

The group time is probably the most important part of the evening and the part the students seem to appreciate the most. The role of the group leader is key.

How to divide students?

This is not an easy one but the following factors could be taken into consideration:

Background

Most group leaders find it helpful to have together students from a similar background as they tend to have similar pre-suppositions and to ask the same sort of questions. However, not all students like this arrangement. Some fear 'losing face' in front of others from their country if they don't understand. Plus, of course, numbers don't always divide neatly into 'one group – one background'.

Language levels and friendship groups

These may also be factors in deciding group make-up.

Size

We have found that the optimum group size is four to six students with two group leaders.

NB Groups may need to be changed after week 1, the Introductory Session, when you have a clearer idea of who will join the course and their different backgrounds.

How to select group leaders?

It is often helpful to have one male and one female leader but this can depend on the make-up of the group. Also we all need to work within the limitations of the helpers available!

A good group leader is someone who:

- makes the group a welcoming place.
- creates an atmosphere where students feel able either to contribute or to sit and listen.

- explains but remembers it isn't their task to convict.
- remembers that questions don't come naturally to some cultures and that they won't easily disagree with someone whom they see as a teacher. It takes time for some students to learn that it is 'safe' to disagree or to question. We usually emphasise this in the Introductory Session – with humour!
- is a good listener.
- is firm when one student seeks to dominate.
- is wise in pulling back from tangents.
- is able to steer without dominating discussion. You should encourage students to speak as much as possible, allowing them to set the agenda and to explore their questions.

A good leader is not someone who:

- applies pressure or attempts to do the Holy Spirit's work for Him.
- attempts to explain the whole gospel message in one session or to share their entire knowledge of the Christian Faith!

Remember:

- Coming to faith is a process and the 'struggle' can be important (see p.16).
- Your role is to be a facilitator and not necessarily to have all the answers.
- The way something is said is often more important than what is said.
- Preparation is vital. It is much easier to be spontaneous if you have prepared well! Then pray for discernment in where to take the discussion.
- Building relationships is key, hence the importance of keeping the same groups together each week.
- It is also important to keep to time in groups. It is better for a student to go home wishing that the session could have lasted longer than to leave feeling over-tired or over-loaded. Having said that, most students complain that the group time is too short (and we allow at least 55 minutes!).

NB Praying together in your group may be appropriate later in the course. We don't recommend it in the early weeks.

The group leaders' notes

These are intended as a guideline. In some chapters, e.g. the early ones where students may not be so forthcoming with questions or in the more difficult subjects, we have included several questions to kickstart discussion. You do not have to cover every question. Leaders will need to judge what is helpful for their group. Always check comprehension and invite participation. NB some students like to read a Bible passage in advance for the following week. It may be worth checking if your group wishes to do this as the course progresses.

What if a student wants to make a commitment to Christ?

Obviously that would be our heart's desire. However, it is important that that is a genuine desire coming from the student and not a response to what the student thinks we want of them! We must remember that, for some cultures, the desire to please, especially someone who has been kind to them or taught them, is very strong. Helpful illustrations in this whole area are the butterfly trying to break out of the chrysalis or the chicken out of the egg. The natural desire on watching is to help. However, the butterfly and the chicken need the strength built up in the struggle to survive as healthy specimens. So too we could be in danger of producing weak converts if we apply pressure to those not quite ready to make a commitment. Having said that, when a student genuinely desires to make a commitment to Christ, we need to gently ensure that they have understood the step they are taking, to lead them through it and then to give them every support in the way of follow-up and nurture. And to rejoice!

A4. Difficulties Encountered



Working with many religious backgrounds

The challenge of preparing and delivering material which will appeal and make sense to those from a wide spectrum of beliefs.

Inconsistent attendance

It is difficult to persuade students that they will get more out of the course if they attend regularly. A nucleus usually do so, but 'irregular attenders' don't help group dynamics. We award certificates for attendance which seems to help a little.

End of
Preview



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