

Raising Awareness of Global Issues in the EFL Classroom

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One of my convictions as an English language teacher and researcher is that global issues should be a component of most any TESOL program, especially in the university context which is where I teach. The theme of the 2017 TD-CUE SIG forum, “Globalizing education: Reflections on shaping broader perspectives in the classroom,” presented a perfect opportunity for me to share about one course that focuses on global issues.

We are bombarded daily with news about climate change, environmental destruction, armed conflict, terrorism, human rights violations, blatant economic inequity; the list goes on and on. These are issues that we share in common with all 7.6 billion of our fellow earthlings and these are issues that are not going to just go away or work themselves out; nor are they going to be solved by random voluntary individual actions. When push comes to shove, solving these problems is going to take collaboration on an unprecedented global scale. A positive example of this is the Paris Accord which is a small step in the direction that we need to be moving in as a species; but many more such steps will be required.

As language teachers, we have the opportunity to make a lasting influence on our learners, whose numbers when seen in terms of one’s whole teaching career, are considerable. I firmly believe that as educators we have a moral imperative to raise awareness and explore these issues with our learners. This imperative applies to us not only as educators, but also as language teachers, and in particular as English teachers. Collaboration means communication, and communication means language. More and more, English is becoming the language of international communication. English therefore occupies a special position when it comes to global issues. In my teaching I have been trying to find effective ways to incorporate global issues content and currently my flagship course for doing so is entitled ‘English Lecture.’ Incorporating global issues into the TESOL classroom involves certain challenges, so before describing the course, let me outline four major challenges.

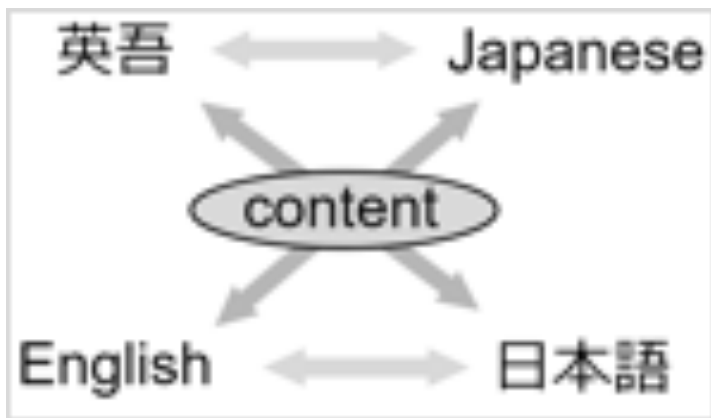


staple	(n.) Rice is the ~ food in Japan.
Christian	(a./n.) ~ people study the Bible and follow the teachings of Jesus.
Buddhist	(a./n.) Almost everyone in Cambodia is a ~.
Muslim	(a./n.) ~ people study the Koran and follow the teachings of Muhammad.

Four Challenges

The first challenge is that there is a lot of useful and free content and resources available on the internet, such as articles, videos and interactive websites. However, these tend to be difficult and dense. If you simplify texts enough to satisfy the conditions for ‘comprehensible input’ or extensive reading and/or listening, you run the risk of excessively dumbing down the issues and losing the complexities inherent to them. If, on the other hand, you do not simplify texts, you then run the risk of overwhelming and demotivating your students.

The second challenge is that university students are often superficially interested in global issues and it can be difficult to really engage their interest to the point where you achieve the snowball effect; and they start to explore and do research of their own volition. You may find students expressing only shallow and simplistic opinions about the issues you are



studying, which may be due to a lack of interest, knowledge, or a combination of both.

The third challenge is teacher knowledge. You are probably as concerned as anyone else is about these issues, but that does not make you an expert. How can you fulfill the role of a teacher when dealing with content that you do not understand in much depth, as you do not want to mislead your students with incorrect information or skewed viewpoints.

The fourth challenge is the role of the learner's first language (L1). The more difficult the content becomes, the more likely that students are going to fall back on their L1 and feel unable to express themselves effectively in English. This would seem to defeat the whole purpose or premise of a language course.

Meeting These Challenges

These are challenges that I have been grappling with since I began teaching my English Lecture course in April 2016. When I was first assigned to this course, I was simply told to lecture in English on the topic of my choice. I did not relish the thought of just lecturing at a group of language students for 90 minutes a week, so my original idea was to use TED talks as 'guest lecturers' and build lessons around those talks in a text-driven approach (Tomlinson, 2013). The text-driven approach involves building a course around texts selected for their power to engage the learner, and leading the learner through a series of activities designed to help them experience and respond to those texts holistically, affectively and multidimensionally. Bringing in outside experts partly solves the teacher-expertise problem. I teach the class in a computer lab, which helps with comprehension when we watch the talks in class, because students can choose their preferred mode: just listening to the English; turning on English or Japanese subtitles; or also reading the interactive transcript in either English or Japanese. Furthermore, they can replay sections that they want to watch again, thus progressing at their own pace. TED Talks, aside from the difficulty of the language, are great texts to work with. Good TED Talks are both affectively and cognitively engaging, and while they tend to have difficult language, this is counterbalanced by all the visual and linguistic support they offer.

When working with the talks, instead of trying to discourage or eradicate L1 use, I try to promote and support translanguaging (Lewis, Jones & Baker, 2012), reinforcing connections and interactions between the L1 and English, so that the former serves to scaffold development of the latter. I encourage my students to pre-watch the talks with the Japanese subtitles or read the Japanese transcript so that they can grasp the content first, before focusing on the English.

When it comes to producing output about this content in English, probably the biggest barrier, after understanding the content itself, is having the necessary vocabulary for talking about it in English. So again leveraging the technology, we make use of Quizlet to study and take weekly quizzes on a class list that grows every week based on the course material. I enlist my students to help me develop the list. When we are looking at a given talk, I have them use the vocabulary profiler on Lextutor to help find important vocabulary; they then submit their findings via a shared spreadsheet for easy collation. The format of the vocabulary list is another way that I try to promote translanguaging. Next I make double entries for each term, one with a Japanese gloss, and the other with a sentence in English that



relates the word to content and context.

Evolving to Meet Students' Needs

The course began to evolve as soon as I had started teaching it. The TED Talks were good, but it quickly became clear to me that a better use of our time would be to focus on discussing and talking about the issues, so I began to flip the classroom. I started having students digest the materials, including TED Talks and other online materials, outside of class. Back in the classroom, I summarize and review the material while they listen and practice taking notes—the ‘lecture’ part of the lesson—and then we spend more time interacting with each other and discussing the issues. I have also started applying a more learner-driven approach by letting the students do the research and bring the issues to class for me. This not only promotes learner autonomy and co-construction of knowledge; but it also saves me time and effort.

The centerpiece of the current version of the course is a cycle of presentations. I prepare materials to introduce a topic; for example, we started our human rights unit by looking at some stories of human trafficking victims. After we have explored those materials together, each student, either individually or with one or two partners, chooses a specific topic related to the general theme of the unit. They research it and prepare a presentation with the goal of teaching their fellow classmates about the topic that they have researched. When we present, it is in round-robin style: each student presents to a partner; next they give each other feedback; and then they change partners and present again. We repeat this several times, exposing them to as much of each other’s work as possible in a way that promotes active listening and engagement (try to sleep through a presentation when you are the only listener!). This also gives them the chance to improve fluency and confidence in presenting their own work. The last time they record their talk to submit it together with their slides for evaluation. A strength of this approach is that they are not only teaching each other; they are also teaching me, which again addresses the teacher-expertise problem. I do not need to be an expert on the content as the point is to explore the issues together, raise awareness about them, and develop tools for discussing them in English.

Working with global issues has proved to be one of the most challenging and rewarding aspects of my language teaching practice, and it is a thread that I intend to pursue and develop as long as my career continues. If you are interested in being a proactive global citizen, I highly recommend experimenting with incorporating global issues into your own practice.

References

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