

Global Issues, Everyday Actions

by David Royal (ESL Etc, Hunan, China)

Introduction

As English teachers, we play a role in globalization and must come to terms with this in our own ways (Guest, 2005; Hronopolous, 2005; Cates, 2004; Griffith, 2004; Peaty, 2004). Some teachers avoid overt discussion of global issues while others attempt to “objectively” cover certain issues. Still others consciously advocate a particular viewpoint, trying to raise awareness or create opportunities for students to take direct actions on local problems.

Personally, I believe that the world is at a crisis point. Over-consumption, pollution and other negative effects of globalization and the “modern” lifestyle are leading us down a dangerous path (Monbiot, 2007; Bigelow & Peterson, 2002; Bowers, 1997). This affects every aspect of my life, including my choices as an English teacher. Thus, in my teaching, I try not only to raise awareness about issues, but also to encourage students to act mindfully.

An Intensive ESL Course on Global Issues

With this in mind, I developed an 8-week *Global Issues* course for an intensive English program at the University of Hawaii. The course is based around individual projects in which students choose an issue and engage in one or more related actions. In the fall of 2006, I did this project with 11 adult students from Indonesia, Japan and South Korea.

From the outset, I gave my students a broad sense of the term “global issues”. I began the course by introducing various types of issues (environmental, social, political, cultural, economic...) and had students brainstorm about specific issues within these different categories. I did not go in to the course knowing which issues would be covered, but instead made students responsible for choosing the course content. They filled out open-ended surveys to indicate which global issues they were most interested in, brought in articles for discussion, and chose their own issues for their final projects. By giving students a lot of latitude in choosing an issue, I hoped that they would find something that really inspired them and would thus read, write and speak more extensively.

Student-Selected Topics and Actions

Next, I asked students to select 4 issues, and to freewrite about why each was important and what we, as individuals, could do to help. I gave examples of individual actions related to various issues. I next asked students to choose one issue and come up with as many actions as they could. Again, I provided models and examples from previous projects. Finally, each student chose an issue and one or more actions to try during the course.

I asked students to experiment with actions that could be integrated into their daily lives. For example, if a student were interested in global warming, I encouraged that student to try saving electricity instead of volunteering at an environmental event. Partly, this was because of the logistical difficulty of coming up with structured activities for 11 different issues in a short amount of time. More importantly, however, I did not want students to come away from the experience thinking that activism required an organization, or was something to be engaged in only at certain times or places. I wanted them to realize the connection between everything we do and global issues. Ideally, I wanted them to realize that all our actions are a form of activism.

Language Learning Activities

At every step, language learning activities were integrated with the content of the class. As Hronopoulos (2005) says, teachers “have a moral obligation to bring these issues to our learners, but we should always be careful to design lessons and tasks that attend to our learners’ language needs.” In this course, students engaged in a variety of activities which were designed to help them develop language and academic skills. They did reading circles where they were asked to choose articles, prepare vocabulary lists, do comprehension questions and discussion questions, and finally lead a group discussion. As part of researching their issues, students found and summarized articles from the Internet. The course also covered both academic writing conventions and basic presentation skills.

Individual Projects

Students were asked to choose the form of the final project, doing either a presentation or a paper. Their project had to include (i) background information on their issue, (ii) a description of and reflection on their experimental action, (iii) their opinions and thoughts on the issue, and (iv) ideas for solutions. Eight students chose to do papers, while three did presentations.

Seven of the eleven students appeared to have more successfully engaged in meaningful action and reflection. I judged projects as being more successful if they offered specific details about the experience and included thoughtful discussion. The four students with less successful projects spoke about their actions vaguely, with little to no indication of any direct experience. One element found in the more successful projects was a personal motivation for choosing their topic. For example, one project on protecting ocean life was done by a student whose spouse worked as a marine biologist. He was interested in learning about ocean life and protecting the environment, but was also motivated by a desire to better understand his wife's work. During a class discussion, he mentioned that he felt that understanding more about his wife's job would bring them closer together.

Another successful project had to do with reducing kitchen waste. This student explained "I always feel guilt for garbage when I throw away it." Thus, even before she began her project, she already had a personal connection with this issue. She wanted to learn more about it and try a behavioral change in order to alleviate negative feelings. The type of desire can be an extremely powerful motivator.

A third successful project dealt with a very personal topic: child abuse. The student did research into the global problem of child abuse and, as his action, changed the way that he disciplined his own children. Before doing the project, he spanked his children, and in his paper, he explained "I don't want my daughters to learn violence from me." As an experiment, he used a sticker board where his daughters accumulated stickers for good and bad behavior. Once a certain number of good or bad stickers was reached, his daughters would receive a reward or a non-violent punishment. After doing this for five weeks, he concluded that

"my daughters do their works and follow the instructions better than before. I have never spanked or screamed them during last five weeks." "My family mood is more peaceful," he added. Having such a deep personal connection to the content can be a strong motivator towards using a language.

Course Outcomes

All 3 students who did presentations said they would continue their actions. This was particularly striking in the case of a student who did a presentation on recycling. He and his roommates saved and recycled 56 containers over three weeks. His presentation was funny and full of little mishaps. For example, he warned students about the importance of rinsing out old tuna cans, and talked about the embarrassment of taking two huge bags of recycling on the bus. In the end, he received only \$2.80, but still concluded it was worth it. When a classmate asked him if he'd do it again, his face lit up. He explained that it was not about the money. He and his roommates agreed that it was important to recycle and that they were definitely going to keep doing it.

The student who did his project on protecting ocean life also expressed a desire to continue his action, despite a perceived lack of results. In his conclusion, he wrote "I will continue my action about my issue after the project although I cannot see the result directly. I believe that I help to protect about ocean life." Two other students also expressed a feeling that the actions of just one person did not have any substantial effect. Next time, I will try to give my students more positive examples of the power of individual action.

Conclusion

As a language teacher, I believe that the best way to learn a language is by using it in meaningful ways. Thus, I believe a big part of my job is to inspire students to communicate in English, and to create opportunities for them to do so. Having them address issues that are important to them is one way to do this. As my teaching evolves, I hope to find better ways to help students discover which issues matter most to them, and more engaging activities for them to do with this content. All of the materials for this project are available at my website <www.ESLetc.com>.

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David Royal has taught English for over eight years, including teaching in both Taiwan and Hawaii. He recently received an MA in SLS from the University of Hawaii and is currently teaching in Hunan, China. He runs the website ESLetc.com and produces a podcast dedicated to bringing global issues and activism into language teaching.

David Royal <david.royal@gmail.com> Website: www.ESLetc.com
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