

### **Global Issues, Everyday Actions**

English teachers are involved in the process of globalization whether we like it or not, and we must come to terms with this in our own ways (Guest, 2005; Hronopolous, 2005; Griffith, 2004; Peaty, 2004; Edge, 2003; Block & Cameron, 2002). For some teachers this means making the political decision to keep overt discussion of global issues out of their classroom. Others attempt to cover issues “objectively,” while others advocate (consciously or not) a particular point of view. In this last case, some teachers may simply try to raise awareness about issues, while others may create opportunities for their students to take action. Every teacher must determine her or his position regarding global issues. Personally, I believe that the world is at a crisis point. I believe that consumption, pollution and other negative effects of globalization and the “modern” lifestyle are leading us down a path to self-destruction. I fear that it may already be too late, but I hope that it is not. This belief affects every aspect of my life, including my choices as an English teacher. Thus, in my teaching, I try not only to raise students' awareness about important issues, but also to encourage them to take mindful action.

From the outset, I want to make it clear that, when I teach, my students determine for themselves which issues we work on. Throughout this paper, I use the term “global issues” to mean any of the myriad of social, political, environmental, cultural or other types of issues that affect our lives and the world in which we live. I do not force my classes to learn about or act upon the particular issues that seem most important to me. Instead, students are primarily responsible for the content. They fill out surveys to determine the topics that we cover, they choose issues for their independent projects, and they bring in articles for discussion. If a student has a particular interest or passion, I encourage her or him to pursue it. For me, it is of prime importance that students choose issues and actions that are meaningful and relevant to their lives. When I refer to “action” or “activism”, I simply

mean action undertaken intentionally with the goal of affecting a larger issue. While I do not question the value of traditional forms of activism such as volunteering and protesting, the action component of my own teaching focuses on encouraging students to look at the power and consequences of their everyday lives.

In this paper, I will describe the work that my students did during an eight-week global issues class at an intensive English program. The students in the class were eleven intermediate-level adult learners from Asian countries. Before looking at the materials themselves, I will outline some of theory behind bringing activism into the language classroom. I will then describe the activities which culminated in the students' final project. Next, I will attempt to determine how successful the projects were. Specifically, I will look for evidence that students actually engaged in and reflected on an action. Finally, I will elements common to both the more and less successful projects, attempting to find ways that, in the future, I can help more students have a successful experience. Underlying this is my belief that sincerely engaging in this kind of reflective experimentation with one's actions can result in long-term positive change.

In our Global Issues class, students were required to research an issue of their own choosing. Many students chose environmental issues, but some also chose social ones like child-rearing and gender equality. They researched their issue and collected background information. They were also asked to come up with and try one or more actions or lifestyle changes that they as individuals could make in order to positively impact their issue. Students had a great deal of flexibility, both in terms of the issues they chose and the types of actions they did. Students were asked to do their actions during the course of our class, although a few did not. In their project, I asked them to incorporate both a description of their action and their reflection on that experience. The final part of the project was to give their opinions about possible solutions to their issue. In addition to being a vehicle for content-based language learning, I hoped that this project would help make students aware of the power of

everyday choices, and the responsibilities that they therefore entail.

### **Global Issues, Ethics and Indoctrination in Language Teaching**

There appears to be growing interest in language teaching regarding the incorporation of global issues into the language classroom. With content-based language teaching, many teachers have become aware of the potential for engaging students with meaningful content about important issues. Journals like *The Language Teacher* (2003, 1996) have devoted special issues to the place of global issues in the language classroom, and organizations like TESOL and JALT have special interest groups dedicated to social justice and global issues, respectively.

In an interview in *The Language Teacher*, peace studies pioneer Johan Galtung observed that language teachers are in “a unique situation because [we] have so much to talk about” (McInnis, 1996, n.p.). In content-based classrooms, we need to talk, read and write about something, so why not use content that really matters to the lives of the students? At the same time, of course, it is important not to neglect the language goals of our students. There is a certain balance that we, as language teachers, need to find. 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” (n.p.).

In 1995, H. D. Brown put forth the idea that those of us “who teach languages have a special responsibility to subvert attitudes, beliefs and assumptions... ..that language teaching is neutral, sterile, inorganic and has nothing to do with political issues, ...and that there is no particular urgency to act assertively to stave off an imminent global environmental crisis.” Now, over ten years later, we can find an increasing number of teachers in both EFL (Jude, 2005; Hronopoulos, 2004; Peaty, 2004; Sargent, 2004; Jacobs, 2001) and ESL (Licht, Maher, & Webber, 2004; Stern, 1997) that are bringing these and other global issues into their classroom. Some teachers go so far as to see the inclusion of

these types of issues as part of the role of an English instructor. “As educators, we owe it our learners to not only improve their English competence, but to also empower them with knowledge to make them responsible citizens that can create a just, humane and violence-free world” (Hronopoulos, 2004, n.p.).

The inclusion of global issues parallels an increasingly critical approach to language teaching. Critical pedagogists, including Pennycook (2001) and Freire (1990) frequently mention racism, gender, global capitalism and colonialism while leaving out environmental concerns. (See Bowers (2003) or Gruenewald (2003) for a thorough examination of this.) Similarly, in much of the literature dealing with critical education, environmentalism is ignored. There is a small but growing group of educators, however, realizing that this omission is untenable (Furman and Gruenewald, 2004; Bowers, 2002; Bigelow and Peterson, 2002). If we are going to honestly incorporate Freire's hope and Pennycook's “preferred futures” (2001, p. 8) then environmental concerns must be addressed. Without concern for our environment, there is no hope for the future.

The concept of preferred futures also brings up the issue of ethics. As Pennycook says, “preferred futures...need to be grounded in ethical arguments for why alternative possibilities may be better” (p. 8-9). While the inclusion of ethics in the classroom has been a controversial issue, the idea that education can be purely objective seems to be losing favor. One of the ideas that I attempt to convey in my teaching is that everything we do is both an ethical and a political decision. Every action that we do or do not take affects power structures and the environment. The effects of our action may be minute or unseen, but that does not absolve our responsibility. “Everything we do has some effect, some impact” (Lama, 1998, p. 63). The decision to exclude politics or ethics from the classroom is no less of a political or moral action than including them. By leaving these issues out of the classroom, the teacher is effectively saying that things should be left the way they are or that it is not our place to question or change them. “A teacher's silence on alternatives to the status quo reduces the risks to the

teacher while also denying choices to students” (Shor, 2000, p. 9). If the classroom is not a place for asking and discussing difficult questions, where is? Again, I am not saying that every teacher should include these issues in their classes. But to pretend that excluding them is not a political and ethical action that models and encourages certain beliefs and attitudes is dishonest.

For Peaty (2004), the crux of the issue is how to bring in content about global issues without indoctrinating our students. In his opinion, promoting certain values, goals and viewpoints in the classroom is not indoctrination “if those values, goals and viewpoints are endorsed by society” (n.p.). I find this position to be extremely problematic. If sustainable values, goals and viewpoints were already mainstream, there would not be such an urgent need for education on global issues. It is precisely because our society endorses values that run counter to the longterm future of this planet that looking at these issues is imperative. It is not the content (issues, values, goals, etc.) which determines whether or not indoctrination is taking place, but the way in which it is presented. When information is presented as known and unassailable, and when opposing points of view are not considered, that is indoctrination. When techniques are used to attempt to force or manipulate students into changing their minds, that is indoctrination. In my own teaching, I try to avoid indoctrination by making our activities more student-centered and allowing a free exchange of ideas and opinions rather than insisting on one “right” answer. I agree with Vandrick (1994) that “[t]he instructor must make it very clear that each person has the right to have and state personal beliefs and that students will not be penalized in any way for their beliefs” (p. 115). When I bring my own opinions into the classroom, I attempt to present them clearly as my opinions and certainly do not place them above questions. As Hronopoulos (2005) said, one “should always encourage your learners to question everything, even the materials you present to them” (n.p.).

Wenden (2004) stresses the importance of working to develop critical reflectiveness, analytical skills and the ability to imagine alternative futures. She argues that true autonomy of thought cannot

exist without these abilities. If one cannot critically question one's own values and assumptions, one is not truly free. Similarly, if someone lacks the skills required to understand the world around them, one is not truly autonomous. A person must be able to envision alternative possibilities for the future. Otherwise, that person is constrained to follow pre-existing paths.

In much of the literature dealing with the inclusion of global issues, there seems to be a reluctance to admit that we, as teachers, model and promote what we think is right. Part of teaching is behaving in a way that you think is right, and sharing your beliefs with students. For example, most teachers discourage cheating and encourage students to treat their classmates' work and opinions with respect. Is this indoctrination? Is this imposing a world view? I agree with Griffith (2004) that “all teachers teach out of their world view, and honest ones admit it” (p. 714-715). Putting it another way, Edge (2003) states “transparency regarding one’s own purpose” (p. 707) is part of teaching in an ethical way. Who we are influences how we teach, and we always convey certain values and views to our students. Honesty about these is the key, along with making them as explicit as possible. Our students are exposed to many different world views all the time, and I do not think they are in grave danger of being steam-rolled by one teacher's opinions, especially when they are expressed transparently and non-forcefully.

Instead of modeling political, social and environmental apathy, I prefer Freire's (1990) suggestion that true critical pedagogy leads to activism: “Utilizing certain basic contradictions, we must pose this existential, concrete, present situation to the people as a problem which challenges them and requires a response—not just at the intellectual level, but at the level of action” (p. 85). Thus, in my teaching, I do not tell students what they should think or do. Instead, by posing questions and encouraging contemplation of various problems, I hope to stimulate them to think and do for themselves.

## **Bringing Environmental Education into the English Language Classroom**

There are some striking parallels between the fields of critical ESL/EFL instruction and environmental education (EE). For one thing, there has been a call from environmental educators to see their field integrated across all academic disciplines (Bowers, 1997). Similarly, many ESL professionals desire an increased awareness among professors in different disciplines of both the issues and methods of ESL education. Also, just as ESL/EFL is concerned with how our students deal with Western norms of classroom participation, plagiarism, silence and so on, EE is interested in questioning the Western cultural norms that lead to overconsumption and environmental degradation. These include viewing the individual as the basic social unit, having an anthropocentric view of the world, seeing change as inherently progressive and seeing tradition as inhibiting progress (Bowers, 1997, p. 7).

Environmental education and ESL/EFL instruction also share an inextricable link to globalization. The process has far-reaching environmental and linguistic consequences, and it is impossible for any conceptualization of globalization to ignore them. EE also addresses the issue of linguistic extinction, although for different reasons. EE is concerned about the loss of knowledge from ecologically-centered indigenous peoples once their languages disappear. Loss of language can lead to an end of transgenerational exchanges of information (Bowers, 1997).

Above, I stated that all education to be political. Taking this one step further, I agree with Orr (1992) that “all education is environmental education” (p. 90). All aspects of our teaching, from the topics we cover to the way in which we handle classroom resources, model and encourage certain environmental practices. Students notice things like air-conditioner usage and whether copies are two-sided. In addition, many English language students are motivated by career aspirations or a desire for travel, both of which have profound environmental ramifications. If part of our job is preparing students for the modern cosmopolitan lifestyle, this carries with it environmental responsibilities.

Just as critical pedagogy accepts the non-existence of a single knowable truth, much of the environmental education literature focuses on considering alternatives rather than finding the one perfect way. “There is no single outlook on what sustainable living entails nor on how to achieve it” (Wals and Heyman, 2004, p. 123). In addition to disagreement among educators about what, specifically, sustainable living involves, there is also recognition that local variation will require different ideas in different contexts. Working towards a sustainable lifestyle “does not allow for universally applicable recipes for sustainable development” (Wals and Heyman, p. 123). This echoes Freire's (1990) idea that education must begin with the students' current situation in mind. “Only by starting from this situation—which determines their perception of it—can they begin to move” (p. 73).

### **Design Principles for the Global Issues Project**

When I first developed this class, the issue-based project did not have an action component. Students were asked instead to do a survey or an interview. I decided to include some sort of action in the project after reflecting on changes I had made in my own life as a result of things that I had learned, and how my quality of life had improved as a result. Students were required to try and reflect on some sort of action related to the issue they had chosen. My goal was for them to experience some awareness-raising, experiment with lifestyle changes based on what they had learned, and then to reflect on that experience.

My first thought was to ask my students to engage in traditional forms of activism, such as volunteering with an organization or taking part in a protest. However, because our class met for just eight weeks, this was very difficult logistically. By the time students had chosen their issues, they had only a couple of weeks to do their action before creating a project reflecting on it. It would be impossible to find organized activities for a wide range of student issues in such a limited time. In addition, many volunteer organizations are resistant to the participation of short-term volunteers.

Beyond the logistical difficulty, I was also worried about giving students a narrow view of activism. I did not want students to come away from the experience thinking that activism required an organization. I did not want the students to feel that activism was something to be engaged in only at certain times and in certain places. I wanted students to realize the connection of everything we do to global issues. Ideally, I wanted my students to end the term realizing that all of our actions are a form of activism.

In Luke's (2001) overview of educating for sustainability, one of the first issues he addresses is the fact that current environmental activism tends to take place “‘at the end of the pipe' when and where horrendous ecological destruction, pollution or toxic events occur in 'nature'” (p. 187). This resonated with me, as I wanted my students to engage in a different type of activism. While some students chose to have a clean-up component to their action, most experimented with a behavioral change where where the immediate environmental effects would be unseen.

In addition, Luke comments on the fact that, even within environmental classrooms, the “articulation of environmental knowledge often sets nature apart in special distant locales and isolates nature’s wild places from modern economies and societies” (p. 188). Nature is treated as something “out there,” something separate from our daily lives and our daily environment. I did not want students to compartmentalize their action as something to be done once a week with some sort of volunteer organization. Instead, I encouraged them to integrate it into their everyday life. Thus, the actions that I asked them to include in their projects were modifications to daily behavior. Examples included changing shopping habits, cleaning a public space or trying to curb their consumption of resources like water or electricity.

Luke attributes the lack of radical environmentalism's success to the fact that “their ecocentric deep alternatives would have society forsake environmental protection by choosing various fantastic forms of social implosion--a return to Neolithic hunting and gathering, zero population growth,

voluntary and/or coercive simplicity, reagrarisation and deurbanisation.” (p. 195) In order to be successful, sustainability agendas must be realistic. In doing this project, I hoped to make students aware of the power of small, everyday actions.

In my own teaching, I am increasingly moving from a focus on raising awareness to fostering context-sensitive activism. I asked my student to not only find an issue that interests them, but to attempt something in their own life to positively impact this issue. Thus, I looked in language teaching literature for examples and ideas on bringing activism into the classroom. Direct action is a component that has been largely absent from most language learning materials. Jacobs and Goatly (2000) looked at 17 randomly-selected post-1990 English language teaching and found that, of a total of 6,167 activities, only 2% of these activities (134) had environmental content. Of those 134 activities, only 2 asked students to engage in actual environmental protection (p. 260).

In the introduction to *ESL for Action*, Auerbach and Wallerstein (1987) give their take on encouraging action in ESL students.

The first step to promoting action outside the classroom is to transform education inside the classroom. Our role as teachers is to create a safe environment in which students can express opinions and, most importantly, generate their own language materials for learning and peer-teaching. Curriculum is not a *product* (developed before the start of the program), but a *process*, which is constantly created through participant interaction. (p. vii)

There are many different types of activism which are possible in the language classroom. In American ESL classrooms, activism-minded teachers often follow a Freirian model and attempt to empower marginalized students. Much of the ESL material has focused on preparing immigrants in North America for participation in their new community. (Licht, Maher & Webber, 2004; Nash, 1999; Stern, 1997) While I found these materials interesting, my situation was different in several important ways.

First of all, as a teacher at an intensive English program in Hawaii drawing students primarily

from Japan and Korea, the majority of my students are not, for the most part, marginalized. They are already relatively empowered. Whereas Freire was teaching L1 literacy to disenfranchised farmers in a “developing” nation, I was teaching L2 competence mostly to relatively affluent young people from “developed” countries. My students already had the ability to get an education and earn a living in their home culture. It is true that they might have had some difficulty in these areas if they were to remain in the United States, but the vast majority of my students did not intend to. Most planned to return to work or school in their home country. Thus, even though I share Freire's goals of equality and social justice, empowering my students was not my primary concern. Instead, I tried to help my students become more aware of the power they already had, and to encourage them to consider how they chose to use it. I believe that the fate of the Earth hangs on the everyday actions of the middle and upper-class citizens of developed countries.

In EFL contexts, some teachers have successfully engaged their students in group actions.

Peaty (2004) gives several examples including:

Bamford (1990), whose sponsored walk attracted the support of several hundred teachers, students and friends, raising two million yen for a development project in Ethiopia, Schwab (1994), who introduced her students to the Foster Parent system and had the satisfaction of seeing them sponsor an Indian child, Rowe (2003), whose students support children at a mission in Vietnam and hold charity bazaars to support volunteer activities in India, and Smith (2002), whose students raised funds for, and built, a house with *Habitat for Humanity*. (n.p.)

While I certainly admire such projects, I wanted to do something that allowed my students the flexibility to choose their own issues and actions. I did not want to force students to learn about or act upon the issues that are important to me. My goal was for them to choose something relevant to their own lives, and thus I wanted to allow each student to make her or his own choice. Also, I said previous, I wanted students to come up with actions that were integrated into their everyday lives, rather than apart from them.

## **The Class and Project**

Global Issues is a class that I developed in the summer of 2005 and have taught four times at an intensive English program located on the campus of a public university. The class lasted eight weeks, with classes meeting twice a week for two hours per session. The students are adults, with most being in their twenties and approximately 75% going on to study at an American university or community college. The class was content-based and the language skills were integrated.

Global Issues was offered at the 300-level, meaning that the average TOEFL score of the students was around 450. During the first fall term of 2006, when I did this project, there were eleven students in the class. There was one from Indonesia, five from Japan and five from South Korea. In prior teachings of this class, we had used *The Future of the Earth* (Arthus-Bertrand, 2004) as our primary textbook. This term, however, we used no textbook.

In terms of format, student projects could be done either as papers or presentations. Instead of giving a length requirement, I asked them to make sure that their project had all of the required parts: background information on the issue, a description of and reflection on their action(s), and their opinion on the issue along with possible solutions. I explicitly told them that my reason for doing this was that I have found that students do longer, more in-depth projects when I do not give a length limit. Eight of the students chose to do papers, while three did presentations. I photocopied and kept a copy of each paper, and had students email me the PowerPoint for their presentations.

## **Determining the Success of the Projects**

Over the course of the eight-week term, I collected four pieces of writing from each student that were (or at least could be) related to the individual action project: a pre-write (see Appendix A), a reading circle activity (see Appendix B), the project itself (see Appendices C and D) and a post-write

(see Appendix E). Two students did not hand in pre-writes because they joined the class late. In addition, I distributed consent forms (see Appendix F) to all eleven students, and all eleven gave me permission to use their work.

In analyzing their work, I first grouped each student's writing together, and looked at their projects. I tried to find evidence that the student had done an action related to their issue and reflected on the experience. Those that did I have termed “successful”. Of the eleven projects, I found seven to be more successful, two to be somewhat successful and two to be less successful. The two less successful projects did not show evidence of action having been undertaken. The students spoke generally about what people should do, but it does not appear that they actually did anything.

The two somewhat successful projects were each lacking in a different way. One, on water pollution, showed evidence that actions had been taken but lacked real reflection. Another, on nuclear weapons, did not offer much evidence for the action. The student claimed to have written a letter to a disarmament group, but did not receive a reply nor include a copy of the letter in the project. In addition, one of the more successful projects was based upon an action that the student had been doing before the class began. The student asked if she could continue her action for the project, and I gave her permission because I wanted to give her the chance to share it with her classmates. I would have liked her to try a new action, but at the same time, I did not want to prevent her from developing a project upon an issue about which she was truly passionate.

After grouping the projects into these three categories, I looked carefully at the more successful ones and tried to identify patterns or common elements. Similarly, I looked at the less successful ones looking for common threads. Next, I expanded my analysis to the other student writing. I first checked whether each student had chosen a reading circle article related to their project topic. I had encouraged them to do so, but they were not required to. I thought perhaps that students who had chosen a related article, and thus spent additional time reading and discussing their topic, might produce more

successful projects. After looking at the reading circles, I looked at the pre-writes and post-writes. I checked for signs of significant attitudinal changes. In addition, I looked for more commonalities between successful and less successful projects.

## **Results and Analysis**

### *Personal Relevance*

As I read through the writing of the students with successful projects, almost all of them seemed to have a personal motivation for choosing their topic. In addition, this type of personal connection to the issue was largely absent from the papers of those students who had less successful projects. Unsurprisingly, it appears that for this project, which requires significant effort, sincere motivation often leads to success. Sometimes, this motivation was revealed in the pre- or post-writing, while other times it manifested in the project itself.

For example, one of the successful projects was done on protecting ocean life. In addition to being concerned about this issue for environmental reasons, the student was also interested because her spouse worked as a marine biologist. She was interested in learning about ocean life itself, but was also motivated, as she said in her pre-writing, but a desire to better understand her husband's work. During one of our class discussion, she mentioned that she felt that understanding more about her husband's job would bring them closer together.

Another successful project had to do with reducing kitchen waste. In her post-writing, this student explained that “I always feel guilt for garbage when I throw away it.” Thus, even before she began working on this topic in this class, this student already had a personal connection with this issue. She chose to learn more about it and try a behavioral change in order to attempt to alleviate negative feelings. In my own experience, I have found the desire to relieve guilt to be an extremely powerful

motivator towards behavioral change.

A third successful project dealt with a very personal topic, namely child abuse. The student had, in the past, disciplined his children by spanking them, and decided for the duration of his project to try using another way. As he said in the introduction to his final paper, “I don't want my daughters to learn violence from me.” For his action, he tried using 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 (such as money) or non-violent punishment (like a timeout). 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 in his post-write.

All three of these students showed a personal connection to the issue that they chose. Furthermore, in addition to producing a successful project, all three also expressed a desire to continue doing their action. Two of the three also said that they would encourage their friends to follow suit. By contrast, in the two unsuccessful projects and two of the three somewhat successful ones, there was no mention made of any sort of personal connection to the issues chosen.

### *Will the Actions Continue?*

One of the things that I am most curious about is whether or not students are going to continue the action that they experimented with in this class. How can I improve the project to make this more likely? I asked students if they planned to continue in the post-write, but I realize that their answers can not be taken at face value because they could well have been telling me what I wanted to hear. Instead, I chose to look at the projects themselves, which were turned in before the post-writes were done, and before any mention of my curiosity regarding the continuation of their actions had been made.

Three of the four projects determined to be somewhat or less successful addressed the importance of continued action. In these projects, however, students expressed this in a very general way, but not really in terms of actions that they themselves would do. For example, a student whose issue was water pollution wrote: “We should use eco-friendly shampoo, detergent, etc. Do help clean up any litter what you see in wherever, especially beaches, rivers and lakes.” There is no real sense here that he intends to continue any action, or that he has tried any of these things. Another wrote: “We have to take actions for stopping global warming...Just try it and keep it goes and thinking for long ran.” Again, this is vague and non-committal. This student, though, elsewhere mentioned two actions that he had tried, namely washing dishes with cold water and turning off electronics when they are not being used. Another student felt that his actions were useless. Referring to his actions, he wrote: “However, it would not be helpful to stop the desertification. Those are too small effort. One or two people cannot do stopping it.” Instead, he decided that the important thing was supporting environmentally responsible companies, because companies have the real power.

Among the successful projects, five of the seven stated explicitly that they would continue doing their action, while the other two implied it. One student, whose issue was helping handicapped and ill children, came up with two creative actions. At first, she wanted to volunteer at Shriner's Hospital, but she was told that one month was too short of a time, and she was unable to volunteer for longer because she had to return to her home country. Instead, she decided to save ten dollars per week by not going to Starbucks and she donated that money to the hospital. In addition, she spent a weekend cleaning up the beach because she wanted children to have a beautiful environment to look forward too. In the conclusion of her project she wrote that in doing “these actions, I realized that I have to keep thinking what I can do for the children's future.”

All three of the students who did presentations concluded by saying that they would continue their actions. This was particularly striking in the case of one student, who did a presentation on

recycling. He described roommates saving fifty-six containers with his two roommates over three weeks and bringing them to a recycling drop-off point. His presentation was funny, 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, and I was afraid that he was going to conclude by saying that the experience was not worth it. However, at the end of his presentation, another student asked him if he would do it again, and his face lit up. He explained that it was not about the money. He said that he and his roommates agreed that it was important to recycle and were definitely going to keep doing it.

The student who did her project on protecting ocean life also expressed a desire to continue her action, despite a lack of perceived results. In her conclusion she 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.” This idea of the lack of impact by individual actions is something that I will return to later.

### *Reading Circles*

I found that only three students chose reading circle articles that directly related to their projects, while two others chose articles that were tangentially related. The three students that chose related articles all produced successful projects, while the two tangentially related ones were split. In addition, however three students with unrelated reading circles had projects that were rated as successful. As a result, it seems that doing a related reading circle may increase the chance of a successful project but it is not necessary. In addition, I realize that the students who chose related reading circles may simply have been more interested in their topics, and were more successful because of this interest instead of any causal connection to the reading circle.

### *The Power of Individual Action*

A few of the students, with both successful and unsuccessful projects, expressed a feeling that the actions of just one person did not have any real effect. Interestingly, of the three people who expressed this directly, two also said that they planned to continue their action. The other, mentioned above, said he intended to shift his focus into supporting eco-friendly corporations. Looking back over this course, I can see that I did not spend enough time helping my students to develop a belief in the power of individual action. In the future, I will attempt to do this more thoroughly.

### **Pedagogical implications**

I realize that this study is greatly limited by the fact that it was conducted with just one group of students. However, there are two main ideas that I will take from this project and apply to my future teaching. First of all, I feel even more strongly now about the importance of having students work on projects which are meaningful to them, for which they have some personal motivation. The next time I do a project like this, I will attempt to design some activities to help students discover which issues are important to them, instead of simply asking them directly. If students have not previously thought about these issues, particularly in terms of how they impact their lives, they may just choose any issue they have heard of. I suspect that a series of freewrites or brainstorming activities based on their lives, as opposed to activities based on global issues, could better help them find a meaningful topic.

In addition, because I recognize the importance of having students choose topics that are personally motivating, I will continue to be very flexible in both my interpretation of “issue” and “action”. Initially, I was a little hesitant about the project based on child abuse, as I thought that the action was not really “activism”. After seeing the wonderful results of this project, though, I realize that I want to restrict my students as little as possible in this area.

The second major thing that I have learned from looking at my students' work is that I need to include some positive examples of the power of the individual. A few students expressed a feeling in

their final paper that one person could not make a difference. Next time around, I will include some readings and discussions about successful activists, and also perhaps come up with some sort of closing activity which encourages students to reflect on and share the differences they have made. As Hronopoulos (2005) said: “Our aim is not to depress our learners but to illustrate that positive change can be achieved if people unite and take action.” (n.p.)

In the future, I will stress the importance and power of individual action more directly in class. Although I have made my beliefs on that topic clear in this paper, I did not speak explicitly about it in class. Next time, I will discuss how, even though the direct consequences of our actions may be invisible, they can have unseen effects and also influence the people around us. Furthermore, they can simply make us feel better about the way we live.

One way in which I could try to inspire more confidence in the power of individual or grassroots action is to profile some success stories. As I reflect upon this class, I can see that we spent a large percentage of the time talking about problems, and a much smaller percentage talking about solutions. And when we did talk about solutions, we talked only about things that we could change in the future. We did not discuss actions that had already been successful. Spending time learning about these types of things might give my students more confidence in their power.

In terms of future research, one of the main areas that I am interested in exploring is what we, as teachers, can do to help foster long-term changes in student behavior. I have the email addresses for the students who did these projects, and I am planning to contact them later to see whether or not they have continued to engage in any actions related to their projects. In addition, I will be curious to know whether or not that have gotten involved with other issues. I have spoken to a couple of students from my previous Global Issues class who say they have become more active and aware, particularly in terms of the food that they eat. I would very much like to figure out how I can improve this project in order to make longer-term change more likely.

Although I fully support the inclusion of global issues in language teaching, I am not suggesting that every teacher should teach in this way. If a teacher is more comfortable using traditional topics and avoiding overt discussion of controversial or difficult issues then, by all means, she or he should continue to do so. A teacher's passion or enthusiasm for classroom content can determine its success with the students. In my own teaching, I believe that my sincere concern about the issues my students bring into the classroom helps to motivate and engage them.

Furthermore, there are clearly settings where giving students a content-based class on global issues might not be appropriate. For example, many high school English classes around the world are part of students' preparation for a college entrance exam. Teachers would be doing students a disservice by neglecting this responsibility. However, for content-based language teachers who have the freedom to determine their own curriculum, looking at some of the larger issues that impact their students' lives can be a good place to start.

For me, teaching critically and encouraging activism is, without hyperbole, a matter of life and death. Given the barrage of information, propaganda and advertising to which we are subjected every day, I believe that it is crucial to be able to think critically. The way in which we live, consuming such a tremendous amount of resources, makes even our “small” actions quite powerful. Furthermore, as I said above, I believe that we are at a tipping point, and that maintaining the status quo will lead to collapse in the not too distant future. Thus, in order to help my students survive in this world, and to help the world survive for my students, I feel obligated to bring global issues and action into my classes.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Pre-Writing Prompt**

Please think about the issue that you would like to do for your final project and answer the following questions. You can freewrite your response, but try to answer most of the questions below.

1. What is your issue?
2. Why did you choose this issue? What are you hoping to learn about the issue?
3. How does it affect your life? How do you think it will affect your life in the future?
4. What action(s) are you considering? What do you hope to accomplish with this action(s)?
5. What do you think the experience of doing your action(s) will be like? How do you expect to feel?

## Appendix B

# READING CIRCLE ASSIGNMENT

### **ACTIVITY PURPOSE**

Reading circles give you a chance to bring a topic that you're interested in into class and lead a discussion about it. You get experience in finding articles, and also in preparing materials. Your classmates get a chance to learn about something new, including some new vocabulary words. Finally, you all get a chance to practice your critical thinking skills while doing the discussion questions.

### **THE GROUP LEADER'S RESPONSIBILITY**

- 1) Select the 1-2 page reading.
- 2) Prepare a vocabulary list of 5-10 difficult words/phrases, underlining the words in the article. I want you to provide the part of speech and leave space for your classmates to write the definition. Also, please leave space for them to write two words of their own.
- 3) Create 6 questions (3 comprehension and 3 discussion questions) to use during the in-class discussion. Also, leave space for your classmates to make 1 comprehension and 1 discussion question.
- 4) Leading and monitoring the discussion of your article among your group members.

### **CHOOSING THE READING**

You can choose any article has to do with a global issue. Choose a topic that you are interested in! I suggest finding an article that is related to the topic you have chosen for your final project. Make sure that the article is not too difficult. Feel free to cut parts or simplify them if you need to. Internet news sites are good places to find readings, but you can also use newspapers, magazines, textbooks, etc.

### **READING CIRCLE DAYS: IN-CLASS READING AND DISCUSSION**

- 1) The leaders need to bring their article on the day before the discussion. The rest of the group will read the article for homework.
- 2) In class, the leader goes over the vocabulary list and answers any questions the group may have concerning the text.
- 3) Then, the group checks answers to the comprehension questions.
- 4) Finally, the group answers and discusses the discussion questions.
- 5) Important: The leader makes sure each person in the group gives their opinion and that the group is not dominated by one person.

## Appendix C

### Final Project - Introduction

In this class, for the final project, I would like you to do a presentation or paper addressing a global issue. This project should include several parts. First of all, you'll need to do some research to collect some background information on the issue. You can use books, magazines, the Internet or other sources. If you are interested in really practicing academic writing, you can include a list of sources at the end of your paper, and I can help you with the format of this.

In addition to presenting some information on your issue, I also want your final project to include some sort of activism. This could mean volunteering somewhere, or getting involved with an organization, but it could also mean making changes in your own life. Below, I have a list of actions and the issues that they are related to. There are many, many more possibilities, this is just to give you some starting ideas. The final part of your project will be about your activism experience, and your thoughts about the future.

| <i>Issue</i>                       | <i>Action</i>   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Air Pollution / Global Warming     | Buy local goods.<br>Don't drive your car / take the bus.<br>Use less electricity (air dry your clothes, etc.)   |
| Consumerism                        | For gifts, make your own or give non-material gifts.<br>Keep track of what you buy and how it was produced.   |
| Coral Reef / Ocean Life Protection | Only buy sustainably farmed / caught seafood.<br>Use non-toxic sunscreen.   |
| Fair Trade                         | Buy fair trade foods / coffee / clothes.<br>Don't shop at places that sell things made with cheap labor.<br>Support co-ops.   |
| Garbage / Waste / Litter           | Don't use disposable cups for your coffee.<br>Don't throw usable things away, give them to charity (ie Good Will)<br>Keep some public area clean.<br>Organize some sort of recycling. |
| Health                             | Eat local / organic foods.<br>Volunteer at a hospital or other health care facility.  |
| Homelessness                       | Volunteer at a homeless shelter / food pantry.  |
| Tree Conservation                  | Take paper out of the recycling stack to make your own notebook.<br>Buy recycled toilet paper / paper towels. Use less of both.   |
| Water Conservation                 | Turn off the shower while soaping up or brushing your teeth.<br>"If it's yellow, let it mellow. If it's brown, flush it down."  |
| Water Pollution                    | Buy organic food.<br>Clean up some river / coastal area.<br>Use eco-friendly detergents / soap / shampoo / household cleaning stuff.  |

**Appendix D**  
**List of Student Final Project Issues and Actions**

|                               |   |
|-------------------------------|---|
| child abuse                   | disciplined her children without spanking them for 5 weeks  |
| childhood illness / handicaps | attempted to volunteer at Shriner's hospital<br>donated \$50 to Shriner's hospital<br>spent a day cleaning up Bellows Beach             |
| conserving electricity        | unplugged everything except the refrigerator when leaving the house<br>used the fan instead of the A/C as much as possible              |
| * desertification             | reduce driving<br>reduce electricity usage<br>buy products from eco-friendly companies  |
| ~ global warming              | turned off electronic devices when not in use<br>used cold water to wash dishes   |
| ~ nuclear weapons             | wrote a letter to a disarmament group   |
| ocean life protection         | cleaned up a beach on three consecutive weekends  |
| recycling                     | collected and returned recycling for himself and two roommates for over three weeks   |
| reducing garbage              | used food waste (fish bones, fruit and vegetable peels) as much as possible   |
| * water pollution             | turn off water when possible<br>use eco-friendly shampoo and detergent<br>clean up litter<br>grow more plants<br>reduce household waste |
| + women's rights              | wrote a series of letters and editorials  |

- \* These two projects did not appear to be based on actions that were actually done, but instead talked more generally about actions we should do.
- ~ These two projects were somewhat less successful. The one on water pollution did not show much reflection, and the one on nuclear weapon did not have much in the way of action.
- + While this project was very well done, the action was something that the student had been engaged with before the class began.

## **Appendix E**

### **Post-Writing Prompt**

Please take a few minutes and write about the issue that you chose for your final project. Please answer the following questions.

1. What is your issue?
2. Why did you choose this issue? Why is it important to you?
3. What did you learn about this issue that you didn't know before?
4. What action did you do? What did you accomplish with this action?
5. Do you plan to do this action again or continue doing it? Will you suggest it to your friends and / or family? Why or why not?

## **Appendix F**

### **Consent Form**

Hi folks. Thanks a lot for the work you did in this class. If it's OK with you, I would really like to use some samples of your writing for my project. I will just take sort samples and they will be completely anonymous. I will not put your name on it. Also, if you do not want to be included, that's fine. I will not lower your grade! :) I promise not to open the envelope you put this in until after I turn in my grades to the HELP office.

Do you give permission for me to take samples from your writing for my project?

YES

NO

Your signature:

Thanks a lot! I've really enjoyed teaching this class! Good luck!