

Bringing Global Issues into the Language Classroom

言語授業でグローバル問題を教えること

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Abstract: Global issues are topics that can be easily woven into the content of language courses. The major goals of introducing global issues into language lessons are to raise consciousness about environmental and social conditions, build critical thinking skills and prepare language learners for the responsibilities of global citizenship. Since the commitment to learning a language is an affirmation to global citizenship, it naturally follows that a language learner's worldview should include knowledge and interest in global issues. Therefore, this paper will discuss how to introduce global issues into the language classroom through designing supplemental materials that use communicative activities for EFL students. After discussing the rationale for introducing global issues as lesson themes, this paper offers teachers several ideas for interactive lessons that can increase students' motivation in the classroom while building their awareness of global issues.

Keywords: global issues, language education, global citizenship, ESL, EFL

要旨: グローバル問題は簡単に言語学習の内容に組み込むことが可能である。語学授業にグローバル問題を導入する主な目的は、環境問題や社会状況に対する学習者の関心を喚起し、批判的思考力を育て、学習者にグローバル市民としての責任を自覚させることである。言語学習はグローバル市民になることを肯定的に捉えることから、学習者の世界観には自然とグローバル問題への知識や興味が含まれていく。本稿では、外国語としての英語（EFL）授業でコミュニケーション活動に使用される補助教材作成を通じてグローバル問題を導入する方法について論じている。授業の主題としてのグローバル問題に関する論理的根拠について考察した後、学習者がグローバル問題に興味を持ち、かつ学習への動機が向上できるように、インタラクティブな授業を展開する案を数例提示している。

キーワード: グローバル問題、言語教育、グローバル市民、ESL（第二言語としての英語）、EFL（外国語としての英語）

1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language is a passport to global citizenship. The commitment to learning a new language demonstrates an interest in broadening one's view of the world and the desire to understand other cultures. As a language learner's worldview expands, so should knowledge and interest in global issues. This expanding worldview is the basis of Oxfam's (2017) definition of global citizenship: "A global citizen is someone

who is aware of and understands the wider world - and their place in it. They take an active role in their community, and work with others to make our planet more equal, fair and sustainable.” Citizenship, however, comes with certain conditions. Phil Bamber (2009) explains that the status of citizenship has three essential aspects. These are a set of responsibilities, entitlement to certain rights and a feeling of belonging. For a language learner to truly understand the relationship between rights and responsibilities while developing a feeling of belonging to the global community, language education needs to include an element of global issues education. That understanding is what can distinguish the global citizen from the global tourist. In an attempt to provide language teachers with ideas on how to help their students understand the responsibilities of global citizenship and develop a feeling of belonging to the global community, this paper will discuss how to introduce global issues into the language classroom through designing supplemental materials that use communicative activities for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. After discussing the rationale for introducing global issues as lesson themes, this paper offers teachers several ideas for interactive lessons that can increase students’ motivation in the classroom while building their awareness of global issues.

2. What are Global Issues?

Although this seems like a fairly easy question to answer, the scope of issues that could be considered “global” may be overwhelming for many language teachers searching for topics to use in classrooms. Snarr (2012) offers a definition that divides global issues into two types. The first type includes issues that cross political borders and are therefore termed transnational issues. Environmental issues such as air pollution and water pollution fit into this category if the problem originates in one country, but affects people in one or more other countries. The second type of global issue according to Snarr would be “problems or issues that do not necessarily cross borders but affect a large number of individuals throughout the world” (p.2). Civil wars, human rights violations, famines and health issues are examples of this type of global issue. This definition begins to narrow the range of global issue topics that are easily adaptable for language lessons. Several language education researchers (Brown, 2015; Cates, 2002) have offered more specific categories for global issues that may be appropriate for themes in the language learning curriculum. These include development issues,

environmental issues, human rights, war/conflict (promotion of peace), health issues, cultural issues and cyber aggression.

3. Commonalities

There are key connections between language education and global issues education. The most obvious connections are that both foster a global mindset, both involve a process of life-long learning and both include goals for a better future. These connections highlight the rationale for language teachers to use a didactic approach of combining global issue themes with linguistic skill building.

3.1 Wider View of the World

The acquisition of a second language and the acquisition of socially responsible behavior are similar in that they are both processes that affect a person's view of the world and foster the development of a global mindset. As a person's view of the world expands, it becomes easier to understand how global issues transcend political and cultural borders. Addressing those global issues and planning sustainable global development require communication among all members of the international community. Therefore, people learning a second language have the opportunity to become ambassadors for peace, equality, human rights and the environment.

Second language learners of all ages, are an appropriate target audience for disseminating information about global issues for several reasons. First, second language learners are more likely to travel abroad or visit countries where they are able to compare and share ideas about causes and solutions of global challenges. Having ample background knowledge about social issues concerning health, welfare, human rights, development and the environment, second language learners that travel globally are empowered to share in dialogues both formal and informal about peace and social responsibility. Furthermore, second language learners in the corporate world that have achieved high levels of language fluency as well as developed crucial critical thinking skills are more likely to receive promotions to decision-making positions in international companies. If those decision-makers have also gained sufficient knowledge of complex global issues, they will have the skills to consider corporate deliberations through a lens that recognizes and understands the causes of inequality in the world as well as what individuals, corporations and communities can do to make a more just and sustainable world.

3.2 Life-long Process

Developing communication skills in a second language and gaining awareness of global issues are both life-long processes. Since the development of social responsibility is formed by many influences over a long period of time, it is fitting for language teachers to integrate content relevant to global issues into lessons and curriculum. Therefore, by incorporating global issue themes into language curriculum, educators can reinforce a socially responsible ethic while raising awareness about important social issues for the millions who choose to study a second language. By doing so, language educators are contributing to the betterment of society by helping students develop a worldview based on social justice and equity. Likewise, language teachers that contribute to the betterment of society are also being socially responsible role models for global citizenship.

The concept of social responsibility is consistent with the notion that education should be for the good of society as well as for the good of the individual. Whether education is attained formally or informally, learning is a life-long process that involves the acquisition of skills and knowledge from a variety of disciplines. Language education and global issues education both contribute to the goals of life-long learning because they are each interdisciplinary and holistic in nature as well as in application. Language learning and global issues education both aim to teach critical thinking skills that involve problem solving and decision making; occupation-specific skills; and, attitude development based on community morals and ethics.

3.3 Common Goals

The benefits of this didactic approach become more lucid when considering global issues education as an approach to education as a whole, rather than just a subject. The aim is to create a socially responsible ethic that fosters awareness about the interdependence of cultural, economic, social, political and environmental factors in a global community. Thus, it is important to integrate global issues education into language education curriculum because a heightened awareness of global issues and their implications can initiate compassionate patterns of behavior towards the less fortunate members of the global community. Such changes in values, attitudes and behavior toward those suffering from social injustices, poverty, disease, conflict, or other global challenges can ultimately result in a better quality of life. Basically, incorporating global issues themes into language lessons is a general educational approach that overlaps and complements contemporary approaches to language education. This didactic approach is

a type of education for global citizenship based on the belief that everyone can make a positive contribution to the global community with the appropriate knowledge, skills and values.

The language educator's role is to begin the process by providing access to knowledge that will raise awareness of issues. Increases in knowledge and awareness inevitably lead to a change in attitude about how a specific issue is perceived. Language classes that focus on higher levels of language production such as writing or debate courses that encompass rhetorical skills in cause and effect analysis or evaluative ability naturally help to develop students' critical thinking skills. Using global themes in such courses will also help to provide those students with the opportunity to develop the skills to take action and participate as global citizens for the betterment of the global community.

4. Pedagogical Rationalization

Although the major goals of introducing global issues into language lessons are to raise consciousness and to promote socially responsible behavior, there are also several pedagogical reasons as well. Lesson materials for using global issues themes in a language classroom can and should be authentic. That is the lesson materials represent real-world issues using common vocabulary and rhetoric. The use of authentic materials in second language teaching intensifies the meaningfulness of content. Meaningful content can be a factor that facilitates the acquisition of language in content-based instruction because meaningful learning increases retention of new knowledge and information (Brown, 2015; Krashen, 2004).

Additionally, including social issues in language courses can heighten levels of interest; thus, increasing intrinsic motivation for the language student. Whether a language course focuses on conversation skills, listening skills, reading skills or writing skills, a specific topic is needed as a backcloth to practice those skills. A language teacher that uses global issues as either content-based instruction or theme-based instruction has a greater variety of appropriate lessons to use as a medium for communication in the language classroom. Often language learners lose motivation when the same topics of family, clothes, celebrities, music, weather and hobbies are used to practice linguistic structures. New topics may revive waning levels of interests for students. If topics rouse a learner's interest, there will be an increase in motivation to use the target language in a classroom setting as well as in real world communication.

Additionally, using global issues for theme-based language instruction provides teachers with an opportunity to integrate all four primary skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) into language lessons. The abundance of available reading material and videos makes it easy to combine lesson tasks that focus on receptor skills with writing assignments and speaking tasks that focus on production skills. Language lessons that integrate these four skills add an element of reciprocal reinforcement to the language learner's ability for deep processing of new vocabulary and grammatical structures (English, 2013). Furthermore, the integration of language skills while using a theme-based method of instruction naturally provides an opportunity for active learning activities in the language classroom such as group work and pair work.

5. Teaching Global Issues

Perhaps, another pressing question might be, "How should a language teacher select a particular global issue for a lesson theme?" The answer to this question depends on the answer to two other questions: Who are the students? And, what are their needs?

Since the primary focus of this discussion is on language teaching, it is essential to first consider the needs of the language learner. Therefore, before selecting a global issue as a theme and before designing materials for a lesson, the language teacher needs to consider the following assumptions:

- 1) The younger the students are the less likely they will be able to understand abstract concepts and intricate cause-and-effect relationships involved in the detailed explanations of global issues. The teaching implication of this is to keep the content material about a particular global challenge simple and within the realm of understanding for children and young teens.
- 2) The lower the proficiency level, the less likely students will be able to use intricate language patterns and high level vocabulary to express opinions and ideas about global issues in the target language. The teaching implication of this is to focus more on receptive skills (reading and listening) and use materials that provide scaffolding of target language structures. It would also be useful to include visual media

(pictures and videos) in order to maximize the comprehensibility of new vocabulary.

- 3) The greater the social distance between local issues familiar to a language learner and a global issue introduced into the language classroom, the more difficult it will be for the language learner to understand. Additionally, a lack of understanding for a lesson theme may result in a lack of interest and motivation for the language lesson. The teaching implication here is to try to connect content material about global issues to students' lives or to local issues that are familiar to them.
- 4) Students do not need to understand all the intricate connections of a particular global issue to benefit from using the issue as a theme in the language classroom. The primary goal of incorporating global issues as themes into language lessons is to begin to raise students' awareness.

6. Keep in Mind!

Straying from the pages of an assigned textbook into the realm of possibly controversial issues can be daunting for a language teacher. With that in mind, here are some additional guidelines to use when incorporating global themes into the language classroom. First, try not to be judgmental. As Brown (2015) advises, "Create an atmosphere of respect for each other's opinions, beliefs, and ethnic or cultural diversity" (p. 579). For environmental issues and human rights issues it is often easy, perhaps even convenient, to blame one country or one specific group. However, it is likely there is more than one cause to a particular problem. Any inaccurate judgment can lead to students' misconceptions. Similarly, and for the same reason, try to avoid over-generalizations and especially generalizations that insinuate an "us versus them" or "we versus you" perspective. A skewed perspective of any issue can produce misinformation or misinterpretation. Misinformation is counterproductive to raising awareness and developing critical thinking skills. Rather, try to help students form their own opinions or try to focus on possible solutions.

Next, keep in mind that the language teacher does not have to be an expert on global issues. If a language lesson helps to raise students' awareness of a particular global issue while providing an opportunity to use the target language, the teacher has been

successful. For example, deforestation is a complicated issue with a number of causes and effects. If students are assigned a short reading about deforestation in one particular country, it would not be necessary for the teacher to expand the lesson in an attempt to explain deforestation on a global level. Particularly for younger students, in-depth focus on global issues in a language classroom could be counter-productive to the original teaching goals of the course. The language teacher does not have to appear as an expert on deforestation, rather the language teacher should be the specialist for teaching the appropriate vocabulary and grammatical structures related to the lesson material.

For older and more fluent students, it is also not necessary to be an expert on a particular global issue topic. If complicated questions arise in regards to an issue, it is more important that a teacher points students in the right direction to find the answers to questions rather than simply providing answers that may be one-sided or lack important details. Fortunately, in this information age it is fairly easy to help students search for information on the Internet that will provide various perspectives on a specific issue. For example, nuclear energy is a controversial global issue related to development and the environment. If a language lesson has a theme related to nuclear energy, it could be misleading for a teacher to provide one-sided information based on opinion. However, having students do some background research, they should be able to find factual information that covers the pros and the cons of nuclear energy use through viewing videos and reading articles uploaded by credible sources. Therefore, the language teacher does not have to be an expert on global issues; rather, just an expert on helping students find accurate information.

7. Ideas for Lesson Materials

Many ESL and EFL textbooks already include some units that focus on global issues. However, using supplemental material in the classroom can be useful to reinforce and build on the language structures introduced in a textbook while also creating an opportunity for students to acquire a greater understanding of a global challenge.

Since many students are visual learners, using short videos is an excellent way to supplement textbook material. Additionally, from a language teaching point of view, videos provide visual clues to facilitate understanding while students practice their listening comprehension skills in the target language. However, some videos have only images with music soundtracks. These videos are useful for helping second language learners understand a particular global challenge through images. Language teachers

can use these videos to make easy “Wh/H” questions for conversation practice. Other videos come with closed captioning so students can read along and watch the video over and over or they can pause the video to look up new vocabulary words in a dictionary. For example, a YouTube search using the words “plastics in the ocean” yields ample results for videos that are seven minutes or less. The results include videos that have been uploaded from credible sources such as the United Nations, National Geographic, TED-ED, VOA News and VOA Learning English. Many have closed captioning and target EFL learners with limited listening comprehension skills.

Perhaps language teachers who include extensive reading as part of their coursework have more choices for reading material with a focus on global issues, but they also have the task of helping their language students find books at an appropriate level. Several examples are: *The Lorax* by Dr. Seuss, a fun children’s book with a theme of sustainable use of environmental resources; or, Gloria Whelan’s *Homeless Bird*, a story of a young Indian girl that helps to raise awareness of social issues and gender issues that are common in many countries around the world; and finally, John Grisham’s *The Testament*, a novel that metaphorically juxtaposes the greed of the richest one percent against a missionary-physician altruistically helping an indigenous tribe in the wetlands of the Amazon. Certainly, there are endless choices for augmenting a language course with an emphasis on extensive reading with material that raises awareness of global issues.

For courses in which shorter readings are more suitable, teachers can supplement textbook material with passages of 300 words and fewer. Websites such as Voice of America, Simple Wikipedia and Breaking News English all have searchable resources that cover a wide spectrum of topics related to global issues. Some of these resources have matching audio files to practice listening comprehension skills. Breaking News English lessons have ready-made worksheets for a variety of proficiency levels.

Perhaps some of the best ideas for global issues lessons are simple stories about people who have made a difference. One advantage of using biographies to exemplify how people can take action toward solving global challenges is that students begin to understand how they themselves can become agents of change in the global community. My Hero and Biography are websites that both have extensive collections of written and video biographies about people who have made a difference through their positive contributions to humanity. Although these sites are primarily for native English speakers or English language learners with high levels of reading comprehension, other

sites like Famous People Lessons and Simple Wikipedia have materials for students with lower levels of English proficiency.

However, not all topics about global issues will appeal to language learners. It is the teacher's responsibility to carefully choose topics that are appropriate for the target group of students. It is also the teacher's responsibility to ensure that any language practice activities are the appropriate level for students. Therefore, the follow section will provide some specific examples of communicative activities that students can do to practice using the target language while learning about global issues.

8. Ideas for Lesson Activities

Lesson activities that feature global issue themes for young learners may be the most challenging to develop. For children, "happy lessons" are very appropriate and safe; therefore, lessons that raise awareness about how to protect animals, give tips on how to save the environment or teach about how children in other countries live would all be age-appropriate. Lesson activities for young second language learners can include songs and games that promote an awareness of environmental challenges. A quick YouTube search yields a variety of appropriate songs for children's language classes such as the "Mother Earth" song with lyrics and the "Save Our Planet Promise" song. There are also plenty of easily accessible videos for young second language learners such as "Global Warming for Kids". One way that teachers can make worksheets from these videos is to take computer screen shoots and then paste the screen shoot into a document file. Then, add easy questions or vocabulary exercises that correspond to the screen shot. After watching the video in class, students complete the worksheet and then check their answers while watching the video again.

Games in Education is a website that has links to Internet kids' games with global issue themes. Many of the games also have links to support materials for teachers. One advantage of using these games to teach is that they become a step toward nurturing independent learners.

Language lessons for middle school or high school students can include short readings on global issues that help to build their vocabulary with useful words. Teachers can use short readings to make cloze exercise worksheets and gap fill activities. Students can then complete those worksheets in pairs before checking answers in a larger group. Likewise, speaking and listening activities can focus on themes about forest preservation, recycling or local issues that are familiar to students in that age

group. One advantage of connecting global issues to local issues is that it provides an opportunity to encourage students to take the next step toward being a global citizen—getting involved!

Finding the appropriate global issues lessons for university and adult language learners also has challenges. Although adults have greater cognitive development and keener critical thinking abilities than teens and children, fluency levels differ greatly among individual adult second language learners. Lessons for the beginner and intermediate levels should not include difficult vocabulary or complex sentence structures, but the content also needs to be interesting enough to keep students engaged. Perhaps, simple questionnaires about socially responsible practices or simplified readings with global issues themes could be appropriate for acquisition of new vocabulary and grammatical structures.

University students and adults with higher levels of fluency are able to combine their background knowledge and language ability to discuss or write about a great number of global issues in depth. By using activities with language structures that focus on specific rhetorical modes such as cause and effect or argumentation, teachers can encourage students to develop their critical thinking skills while examining global issues from a variety of perspectives.

One idea that encourages independent learning is a variation of the classic assignment “Show and Tell”. First, have students choose a global issue that interests them. To learn more about the issue they find and watch several internet videos. Then, they choose one video of about three minutes to show to the class. After showing the class they explain why they chose the video and also share their opinion about the video and the global issue they chose. Other students can ask questions. This idea represents a student-centered learning approach and gets all students involved in the learning process.

9. Conclusion

When an individual decides to study a second language, they are affirming their interest to interact with people from other cultures or regions. Thus, studying a second language equates with expanding one’s view of the world and is a conscious progression towards a commitment to global citizenship. That commitment underscores the connections between language education and global issues education. Both language education and global issues education have an intrinsic purpose of strengthening bonds across borders so that people can communicate more effectively to ensure a more peaceful future.

Introducing global issues as language lesson themes can foster EFL students' awareness of global issues. Therefore language teachers can become agents of change for a better future by using content-based and theme-based lessons that focus on promoting awareness of global challenges.

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