

# COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT GLOBAL EDUCATION AND LANGUAGE TEACHING (I)

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## ABSTRACT

Global education is a new approach to language teaching which aims at enabling students to effectively acquire and use the foreign language while empowering them with the knowledge, skills and commitment required by world citizens for the solution of global problems.

This paper deals with some of the most common questions that language teachers ask about global education. These questions deal with the following concerns: (1) Aren't world problems too depressing for language classes? (2) Shouldn't language teachers avoid controversial issues? (3) How can teachers do global education with a set textbook? (4) How can teachers do global education when they must prepare students for examinations? (5) Which global issues should teachers teach? (6) Should language teachers teach about all issues or focus on just one? (7) How can language teachers teach about world problems when they don't know much about them? (8) Wouldn't language teachers need specialized qualifications to properly teach about world problems?

It is hoped that this paper will help language teachers gain a better understanding of global education and will encourage them to experiment in their classes with teaching about world problems, international understanding and global awareness.

## INTRODUCTION

A small but growing number of language teachers in Japan and abroad are experimenting in their classes with ideas from the field of global education. Some of these teachers are experimenting with approach, seeing how they can integrate concepts such as global awareness, international understanding and social responsibility into their teaching. Others are experimenting with content, building foreign language lessons and courses around "global issues" - world problems such as war, apartheid, world hunger, racism or tropical rainforest

destruction. Yet other teachers are experimenting with pedagogy, borrowing ideas from fields such as peace education, development education, human rights education and environmental education for their language classes.

For teachers experimenting with global education, a major problem has been how to explain what they're doing to colleagues, school directors, parents, students and the general public. Many language teachers, for example, have never heard of global education, have no idea about the field or its implications for language teaching, and have never considered dealing with world issues or adding a global perspective to their teaching. Given the increasing number of journal articles and conference presentations dealing with global education topics, a small but growing number of language teachers are gradually becoming familiar with some of the ideas in the field. Some of these people, however, have false notions and misconceptions about the aims and methodology of global education. Still others are interested in exploring the field but first have a number of basic questions they need answered before they can proceed further.

This paper, then, aims to give an overview of global education as an approach to language teaching by attempting to answer commonly asked questions that language teachers pose. The questions themselves are a distillation of scores of actual questions by hundreds of language teachers from dozens of seminars on global education I have given over the past several years in cities throughout Japan and in countries as diverse as Vietnam, Canada, Hungary and Malaysia. The answers are by no means definitive, but are rather an attempt to correct misconceptions and to explore aspects of global education as it concerns foreign language teaching. Needless to say, these "answers" are but one set of possible responses to the questions posed and reflect my own personal view of global education at the present time. Still, I hope this paper will help to clarify understanding of the field of global education and stimulate language teachers to consider how they can promote global awareness, international understanding and a commitment to solve world problems through their foreign language teaching.

## 1 GLOBAL ISSUES AS DEPRESSING TOPICS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING

**My language students only care about sports, fashion and pop music. How can I get them interested in heavy, gloomy, depressing topics such as human rights and world hunger?**

While it is true that many people have negative images of issues such as world hunger,

refugees or human rights, it is also true that many language students have negative images of learning grammar or of studying foreign languages in general. Most teachers accept it as given that one of our tasks as language educators is to transform students' negative attitudes towards language learning into positive motivation which will lead to sustained efforts at language study and success at language acquisition. In the same way, the global language educator's task is to transform students' apathy, misconceptions and negative images of the world's problems into a sustained commitment to acquiring the global knowledge and skills needed for working to solve world problems.

Just as there are many exciting techniques and activities which can help language teachers to develop positive language learning attitudes, global education also boasts of a wide range of techniques and activities which can help transform student apathy or indifference towards global issues into curiosity and enthusiasm. These include ideas from fields such as cooperative and experiential learning, tasks such as problem solving and information searches, and activities such as role plays, games and simulations.

Otsu (1987), for example, demonstrates one approach to building student curiosity and research skills by bringing a box of bananas into the classroom and distributing them to her Japanese students. While students eat their bananas and wonder what's going on, she begins a questioning process about the origin of the bananas, where they were grown and how they got to Japan, and soon has her students researching such issues as malnutrition in the Philippines, multinational agribusiness and unfair world trading practices. Bigelow (1985), meanwhile, begins his curriculum on South Africa with a "discrimination game" which has the class divided into a privileged White team and oppressed Black team. After personally experiencing the shocking inequality of the apartheid system, students suddenly develop a strong personal "urge to know" about South Africa, about how things ever got that way and about what is being done to overcome the apartheid system and mentality.

Other global educators use role play in a similar way to ignite student interest. Nagashima et al (1988), for example, have language students roleplay refugees in order to build empathy and concern for their situations while Franz (1987) includes an exercise called "What Would You Do?" where students take on the role of a Third World peasant or slum dweller and explore the problems and options open to them. More ambitious and dramatic are full-scale simulations. Ushimaru (1990), for example, has her language students explore divergent views on tropical rainforest destruction by having them form groups and become South East Asian governments,

tribal rainforest people, Japanese logging companies and local environmentalists who then debate and try to reach a principled solution. Zenuk-Nishide (1991), meanwhile, has described another ambitious simulation whereby Japanese high school English students each assume the role of a particular country in the world and carry out a full-scale mock United Nations in English.

World problems and social issues need not be ignored in favour of more trivial topics, then, merely because they seem gloomy or depressing. Popular student interests such as sports, fashion and pop music, however, are by no means antithetical to global language teaching. Indeed, good global education, like good language teaching, insists on starting with student interests, not ignoring them, and building from them to new skills and knowledge. What is necessary is to bring to these student interests a global perspective and a positive learning environment which promotes knowledge of the world, builds skills for world citizenship and fosters a sense of social responsibility and action for a better world.

If students enjoy pop music, then by all means use it in the global language classroom. But why not focus on music which embodies the commitment and social concern we are aiming for in our students - songs such as "We Are The World" about action to end world hunger or "They Dance Alone" about human rights in South America. If students enjoy reading about actors and pop musicians, then this interest should be exploited by language teachers. But why not focus on socially-concerned actors such as Robert Redford (involved in environmental issues) or Jane Fonda (active in the world peace movement) as well as globally-aware musicians such as Stevie Wonder (active in working for civil rights and against apartheid) or Sting (Amnesty International member and activist in the fight to stop Amazon rainforest destruction and protect the tribal peoples who live there).

Ultimately, the key to imparting a global perspective and awakening student interest in world affairs lies with the skill and creativity of the global education teacher. Even in the worst situation, with an unmotivated, uncooperative or hostile class, a good global education teacher can always find a way to develop in his/her students the global awareness, knowledge and skills needed for socially-responsible world citizenship. To prove the point, there is the case of a high school teacher faced with a class of tough young boys who hated school, refused to study and had only one interest in life - motorcycles. The prospects for promoting any learning at all looked bleak, let alone something as ambitious as global education. Yet the teacher was both resourceful and committed. Instead of giving up or trying to force his students to study against

their will, he took the opposite approach by appealing directly to his students' interest.

Noting that the only interest his students had in life was motorcycles, he announced that the sole topic of the course would be...motorcycles. Suddenly his students eyes lit up. Breaking his students into groups he explained that he'd like each group to make a class presentation on some aspect of motorcycles. In a flash, the students came alive, sitting down excitedly in groups discussing what presentation they'd make. Next week, the first group gave their presentation on motorcycle engines with the full attention of the class. After the presentation, the teacher started asking questions along the lines as follows: "Where is this engine made?" "Japan" "What about that piston ring?" "I think that's from Germany" "You think? I thought you guys were the experts!" "What's that part made from?" "Copper" "Hmm. Where do you think the copper is imported from?" "I don't know. I'll check and let you know next week". Suddenly, the students were looking at motorcycles in a new way, seeing how the engine, parts, fuel and all other aspects of motorcycles were linked to foreign countries and the wider world.

Having finished their presentations on motorcycles, the teacher then asked "OK. What do you want to do now?" Then, dramatically, he suggested "I know. Why don't we plan a motorcycle tour of the world! We can arrange to ride through all five continents and each student can plan his own route." Again, the students eyes lit up with excitement - a tour of the world by motorcycle! Soon, groups of students were sitting down planning where they'd go in Africa or how they'd organize their overland tour of Asia. To plan their tours properly, suddenly all sorts of global information became relevant for these formerly unmotivated students - the geography of Latin America, the monsoon season in Bangladesh, the distance from Moscow to Warsaw, the currency used in China, the religion and customs of Saudi Arabia.

All through this, the teacher kept asking questions. To one student: "What do you think you'll see in India?" "Probably lots of beggars" "Hmm. So there's poverty in India. What do you think the reason is?" To another student: "You've planned your motorcycle route through Ethiopia. You know there's famine there, right?" "Oh?" "What do you think the causes might be?" Soon, under the guise of planning a motorcycle trip of the world, his students were delving into a variety of global issues - world problems of war and hunger, deforestation and desertification, human rights and refugees. In this fashion, then, through skillful teaching and creative use of student interests, this particular teacher was able to transform a "hopeless" class of hostile students into a community of global learners expanding their international awareness while exploring world problems. Though an unusual case, this is an excellent example of the

creativity and commitment required of global language teachers and of what is possible in stimulating global awareness among initially unmotivated students.

## 2 DEALING WITH CONTROVERSY IN GLOBAL EDUCATION

**Global education advocates the teaching of world problems and social issues. Yet many of these issues are very controversial. As language teachers, shouldn't we avoid controversy and just stick to our job of teaching language skills?**

The dream of controversy-free teaching is very attractive, and yet is just that - a dream. Like it or not, controversy pervades all aspects of life from disagreements about global problems of ozone destruction and international trade friction to disputes about local problems such as where to site the new town garbage dump.

Education is no different. As Stradling et al (1984) point out "virtually all subjects and disciplines have their controversies and unresolved questions. Historians disagree over interpretations of events. Economists dispute the causes of inflation. Novels and plays continue to be a matter of controversy among scholars and critics. The natural sciences have their fundamental disputes and controversies: the origins of the universe, evolution... To teach these subjects as if there were no controversies or open questions about matters of fact and interpretation would be to mislead students."

Language teaching has its own share of controversy. Differing models of the nature of language, passionate views on contradictory language teaching methodologies, sharp differences of opinion on what language varieties should be taught, conflicting ideas about what textbook to adopt - all these are controversies which language teachers must deal with as an inherent part of their profession. Language teachers, then, are no strangers to controversy. Yet, all too often, textbook writers, teachers and schools choose to omit important social issues or non-traditional viewpoints from the language class solely because these are controversial.

While this omission may seem harmless to some educators, others are concerned about the message this sends to students. Eisner, for example, criticizes the lack of a systematic examination of social issues in American high school English classes and describes this as the "null curriculum", or the curriculum which does not exist (Totten 1986). He goes on to argue:

*"It is my thesis that what schools do not teach may be as important as what they do teach. I argue this position because ignorance is not simply a void; it has important effects on the kinds of options one is able to consider; the alternatives one can examine, and the perspectives with which one can view a situation or problem."*

Ignoring important but controversial world issues in our language teaching curriculum is therefore not an omission of minor importance. Rather, it means that instead of empowering our language students with an understanding of complex world problems and what can be done to solve them, we are subtly teaching our students that language study is irrelevant to the world and the controversial problems facing it. It means that instead of teaching knowledge, we are perpetuating ignorance.

Perhaps one of the most common misconceptions in global education concerns the confusion between teaching for controversy and teaching about controversy. For many people, teaching controversial issues such as war and peace in language classes conjures up images of language teachers opening up a Pandora's box of violent emotions, heated arguments and clashing values among parents, colleagues and students. Given this kind of misconception, it is natural for teachers and schools to want to steer clear of any involvement in controversial world problems or social issues.

For global education, however, the aim in teaching about controversial issues is not to produce controversy but to understand controversy. In taking up the Arab-Israeli problem, for example, the aim of a global education lesson would not be to inflame passions or to put forth one particular view of the issue, but rather to seek to understand the problem. What are the roots of the conflict? What is the history of the issue? What are the views of the various parties? What is the Israeli position? What is the Palestinian position? What does the UN say? the US? the EC? international human rights groups? What is the Palestinian intifada and why is it happening? What are the possibilities for a resolution of the problem? What can we as language teachers and students do to help bring about a just and peaceful settlement of the conflict?

As can be seen from this example, the aim of global education is to come to an honest understanding of complex world problems which will lead to principled action aimed at achieving a just solution. In this light, controversial issues present not a Pandora's box of problems but a chance to better understand the world; not a source of outrage and emotion but an occasion to develop important skills of research, critical thinking and conflict resolution

through the study of critical world problems in a language learning context. For language teachers, global education is thus an invitation to understanding and action. As such it echoes the idea of noted educator Alfred North Whitehead that “a clash of doctrines is not a disaster - it is an opportunity”.

A final argument for dealing with controversial topics in language classes comes from language educators themselves, who argue that controversy in itself is vital in getting students to actively engage in communication in the foreign language. Black (1970), for example, argues that a key factor in successful discussion classes for advanced foreign language learners is the choice of serious topics relevant to students' interest. He goes on to state “no one is likely to make the effort of expressing himself in a foreign language on a subject he would not deign to discuss in his own language” and emphasizes how the choice of actual problems from their own environment will get students animatedly involved in discussion.

Noted language educator L.G. Alexander likewise feels that controversial social issues are an excellent stimulus for oral communication practice, even in secondary school foreign language classes. Not surprisingly then, his popular oral skills textbook series for teenagers and young adults (Alexander 1975; 1976) covers such global issues as sexism, the arms race, wealth and poverty, waste and overconsumption, the Vietnam My Lai massacre, terrorism and world hunger, recycling and pollution, and animal and children's rights. In the teacher's notes to the series, Alexander stresses that the aim of the books is both linguistic and educational: “over and above the basic linguistic objective, (the series) is concerned with moral education and social values. Most of the topics deal with serious issues. They have been selected for their relevance to modern living. The exercises are designed to encourage and train the pupils to think for themselves...(and to) ask the right questions.” A global education approach to language teaching similarly stresses that controversy in itself need not be inimical to language learning, but that controversial issues provide an opportunity for both the acquisition of language skills and the acquisition of vital knowledge, thinking and action skills which can help young people better understand and cope with important social issues which face our world.

### **3 LACK OF CHOICE IN TEXTBOOKS**

**Many language teachers have no say in the choice of the textbook they must use.**

**Teachers of English in Japanese high schools, for example, must teach using English texts**



**chosen by their school from a set list of books authorized by the Japanese Ministry of Education. How can teachers in this situation deal with global education? How can language teachers teach about global issues when they have to teach from a set textbook?**

A common complaint of some language teachers is that, much as they'd like to teach about global awareness and world problems in their language classes, the textbook for the courses they teach is decided by the school, leaving them no chance to experiment with global education. This complaint is particularly common among Japanese high school teachers of English whose textbooks are decided from among a set list prescribed by the Japanese Ministry of Education. On the surface, this would seem to prevent school English teachers from touching upon world problems in their classes. Before coming to this conclusion, however, we need to take a closer look at what topics are included in these set texts laid down by the Ministry of Education.

Once we take a look, it soon becomes clear that not only does it become possible to teach about world problems but that, indeed, this actually becomes inevitable. To see why, we need only to refer to a recent survey of Japanese high school English textbooks carried out by Nakabachi (1992). In this study, Nakabachi carried out a content analysis of the topics covered in 48 recent government-approved Japanese high school English textbooks. This survey was both quantitative and qualitative, examining questions such as "Do any world problems appear in English textbooks in Japan? If so, which ones? How much coverage do they get? How are they dealt with?"

Nakabachi's findings make interesting reading. Of the 48 textbooks, 30 (62%) contained at least one lesson on environmental topics, 34 (70%) contained one or more lessons on human rights and 26 (54%) included a lesson on the theme of war and peace. The 48 textbooks studied comprised from 10 to 20 lessons each, giving a total of 752 individual textbook lessons surveyed. Almost a fifth of these 752 lessons (140 lessons in total) dealt with a social or world problem. The kinds of global issue themes found in the survey ranged from environmental topics such as pollution, endangered species and deforestation to human rights topics such as black civil rights in the US, women's issues and apartheid to peace topics such as World War II. Though a degree of superficiality and stereotype were found in the way textbooks handled these social issues, the fact remains that they are in the texts. Perhaps most relevant here is that all of the 48 textbooks studied contained at least one lesson on a global issue. As Nakabachi puts it "rather than being an option which English teachers debate 'Should we teach global issues?', it turns out that global

issues are unavoidable in high school English textbooks”.

The first point to make for teachers having to use set texts, then, is to examine carefully the content of the texts you are given to teach in order to exploit to the full the topics of global awareness, world problems and international understanding you find there. A look at recently published EFL and ESL textbooks - whether conversation texts, reading texts, academic skills books or others - reveals a growing trend among writers and publishers to include important world issues as language learning topics.

For teachers given textbooks to teach which contain no lessons at all on themes of global awareness or social issues, possibilities still exist. The most obvious is to supplement the text you are given with materials on global issue themes. These can function both to review the language points of the textbook while raising student awareness of world issues. Many traditional textbooks, for example, include lessons at beginner level about describing people. These lessons may introduce rather anonymous textbook characters such as “Mr. Smith” or “Miss Jones” in order to practice language items such as “What is his name?” “Where does he live?” “How old is she?” “What does she do?” Instead of confining such practice to repeated drilling of dry textbook information, applied practice in a global education context can be easily arranged by bringing in labelled pictures of real people in the real world. Depending on the pictures, this might elicit language practice such as the following:

Teacher (pointing to Picture # 1): “What is his name?”

Student (recognizing the picture or reading from the label): “Nelson Mandela”

Teacher: “Where does he live?”

Student: “In South Africa”

Teacher: “How old is he?”

Student: “72”

Teacher: “What does he do?”

Student: (reading from the label): “He’s a Black leader in South Africa”

Teacher briefly explains (perhaps in the students’ mother tongue) who Nelson Mandela is and why he is world famous.

Teacher (pointing to Picture # 2): “What is her name?”

Student (reading the label on the picture): “Tevi”

Teacher: "Where does she live?"

Student (reading): "In Thailand"

Teacher: "How old is she?"

Student (reading): "8 years old"

Teacher: "What does she do?"

Student (reading): "She's a Cambodian refugee"

Teacher briefly explains (perhaps in the students' own language) the situation of Cambodian refugees and of refugees living in the students' own communities.

Through simple supplementing such as in the examples shown here, innovative teachers can thus provide effective language practice for traditional textbooks and at the same time stimulate students' interest in global affairs and the world beyond the classroom.

Finally, while it's important to exploit fully the global themes that do exist in textbooks and to supplement when possible, it is also important for language teachers striving to impart a global perspective to their teaching to do more than just accept whatever textbook is handed to them. While working with what they have, global language teachers should also make efforts to persuade their colleagues and schools to adopt textbooks which promote global awareness and international understanding. Similarly, they should strive to create a demand on materials writers and language education publishers to create new textbooks which stimulate critical thinking, build concern for the world's problems and ensure an honest understanding of controversial social issues.

#### 4 GLOBAL EDUCATION AND THE EXAMINATION SYSTEM

**In many countries, school foreign language study is tied to language proficiency examinations which can determine one's future career. In Japan, for example, the study of English-as-a-foreign-language at junior and senior high school level is very strongly influenced by the university entrance examinations. How can teachers adopt a global education approach to language teaching when the language program is driven by external tests? How can Japanese high school teachers introduce world problems into class when the curriculum is dominated by preparation for university entrance examinations?**

Many high school teachers of English in Japan express great interest in global education, yet complain that the current university exam-oriented syllabus prevents any attempt to deal with global issues. For outsiders unfamiliar with education in Japan, English classes in Japanese high schools would at first glance seem like an ideal place to have young Japanese people improve their English communication skills while gaining a global perspective through learning about foreign cultures and world problems. In actuality, however, high school English classes are largely dedicated to preparing students for the highly-competitive university entrance examinations which will determine their future status in society. Rather than appearing as an exciting international language, the key to communication with the wider world, and a medium through which students can study important issues facing themselves, their society and the planet, English all too often appears to students as an endless list of irrelevant vocabulary and grammar rules which must be memorized solely in order to pass the entrance examination to get into a “good” university. So intense is the system that English teachers who do try to allow more time for communication practice or discussion of social issues are often accused by students and parents of robbing the class of valuable exam-preparation time.

Given this situation, then, it is natural that many Japanese high school language teachers feel there is no way they can deal with global education and global issues in their English classes. Indeed, at first glance, global education and the Japanese high school examination-oriented syllabus seem almost total opposites. Educators such as Sasada (1991), for example, point out that where global education aims to teach students to think for themselves, the examination system aims solely at memorization; where global education sees foreign languages as windows on the world, the exam system sees them as a mountain of vocabulary and grammar to be learnt; where global education aims to foster cooperation, the exam system fosters intense competition; where global education aims to widen students’ views, the exam system forces students to narrow their vision to only “what’s on the test”.

Apparently, then, it would seem that global education is just basically incompatible with the exam-driven high school English education system in Japan. From all appearances, we have two opposite philosophies of education in conflict. Though this seems an impossible situation, many teachers find it hard to just give up and end by echoing the thoughts of Sasada: “in their driving motives, global education and the examination system appear to be enemies. But are they really mutually exclusive? As long as the examination system remains, is there truly no room for global education?”

Perhaps we can solve this deadlock with some global education thinking. One principle of global education is the need to get down and look at the facts since too often we let our images of a problem obscure perception of reality. And, as the field of conflict resolution shows us, people locked in what appears to be total conflict often share a wide range of unperceived common interests which can enable the players to move from a win-lose situation to a mutually satisfying win-win outcome.

Based on these principles, there should be some shared ground within which the aims of both global education and exam preparation can co-exist. Similarly, a closer look at the stereotype “we can’t teach global education because of the entrance exams” should reveal some interesting possibilities that the stereotype obscures.

To begin with, let’s look at the reality of the entrance examinations to see what kind of options might exist. Interestingly, as soon as we do this, multiple possibilities for global education immediately emerge. The first point which emerges from a content analysis of examination test questions is that a significant number of universities are including global issue topics in their entrance examinations. Sasada (1991), for example, did a study of 76 entrance examinations offered by national and prefectural universities and colleges throughout Japan in 1991. Of these, he found 13 reading texts and three writing questions about environmental issues alone. Hokkaido University, for example, featured a test dialog between two Japanese discussing what they could do to help the environment. Aichi University of Education required exam takers to write a 100-word essay presenting their own ideas on what to do to protect the environment. Yamaguchi University used for a test item an essay on the relationship between environmental problems, international cooperation, Japan’s responsibility and the role of education. As well as environmental problems, he found test items on other issues such as sex roles and human rights, leading him to conclude “a collection of actual exams, especially second-stage exams for national universities, is an incredibly rich source of reading and writing materials on global issues”.

Given that global issues form a significant (and growing) content of university exams, Sasada argues that, rather than being irrelevant to the examination system, global issues actually comprise an indispensable topic for exam preparation. Given the trend to include topics concerning critical world problems in exam questions, not teaching global issues to high school English students will hurt their chances of passing the exams they sit for.

This realization, however, requires a key shift in attitude among instructors. Most high

school English teachers in Japan, Sasada notes, believe the “myth” that traditional teacher-centred grammar translation is “the” most effective method for preparing students for university entrance exams. While noting that some exam questions do test discrete mechanical knowledge of vocabulary and sentence structure, Sasada points out that reading texts also comprise an important part of the tests. With these texts increasingly dealing with world problems, successful test takers will need to know about and understand the nature of key global issues such as the environment, human rights, war and peace, as well as be able to summarize the issues and give their opinions in essay-writing questions. Global education thinking skills such as critical thinking, sorting out facts from opinions, and making logical inferences would conceivably also help learners to achieve better test scores in these reading and writing sections of the exam.

The aim of global education, of course, is not to compromise itself in order to fit into counter-productive education or examination systems which stifle global awareness, exclude active learning skills or foster negative competition. As we have seen, the Japanese examination system is at odds in many ways with the goals of global education and, to that extent, prevents young Japanese people from developing as globally-aware world citizens committed to solving world problems. Global educators, therefore, have a duty to work to transform the education system in Japan in order to make it more responsive to the need of the world community for socially-responsible young Japanese people with a global perspective. At the same time, as we have seen, the current Japanese university entrance examination system not only allows the possibility of teaching about world problems and global issues but actually demands this. High school English teachers in Japan, therefore, have the challenge of teaching for global awareness within the exam system while at the same time working to transform it into a system of education for world citizenship which will enable young Japanese people to work together with other youth from around the world to build a peaceful future free of war, hunger and environmental destruction.

## 5 CHOOSING WHICH GLOBAL ISSUES TO TEACH

**When people talk about global education, they mention a vast range of international problems - war, prejudice, environmental destruction, world hunger, refugees, apartheid and a host of other issues. Where should we begin when teaching about world problems?**

### **What global issues should we teach about in our foreign language classes?**

One of the first problems facing language teachers interested in global education is the question of what to teach about. Given the daunting range of world problems facing us, it is understandable that many teachers feel overwhelmed when considering where to start. The answer to this question, however, is that there are a number of options. Let's take a look at these.

One answer to our question, rather obvious perhaps, is that it doesn't really matter which issue you start with. What is important is to start somewhere. Bamford (1990), for example, discussing language teaching in Japan, states that "it doesn't matter what the issue is: it might be a global one like hunger, human rights or the environment, or a more local concern. It might be a cause that you personally support or a topic raised in the coursebook or perhaps brought to class by a student in the form of a news article." The most important thing, according to this first view, is to jump in somewhere and start swimming.

Bamford's statement opens up a number of options which constitute several further answers to our question "What issues should we teach? Where should we start?" One option, as he mentions, is to start with issues of global importance such as hunger, human rights or the environment - world problems which affect the whole planet and all of us on it. In this approach, we would start on the global level, look at the problems which most seriously affect our world, see how they affect us and our students, and then take these as content for our language class. This approach would be characterized as global issues-driven, as top-down (global to local) and might result in a content-based language course titled "World Problems" or "A Survey of Global Issues". The strength of the course would be in harnessing students' curiosity about the outside world by involving them in "international issues" through the foreign language.

A second option would be to pick up Bamford's idea of starting with a local concern. This might involve issues such as the environment (perhaps a case of a local factory dumping toxic waste into a nearby river) or prejudice and intercultural understanding (perhaps a local case of discrimination against an ethnic minority, handicapped person or foreign worker). These local problems could then be linked to the global context of which they are a part, showing how the same problems face other people around the world. This approach would be characterized as local issues-driven, as bottom-up (local to global) and might result in a content-based language course entitled "Social Issues in Our City". The strength of this course would be in community

relevance through harnessing student interest and awareness of issues in their own communities.

A third option would be Bamford's idea of focussing on a cause that you as the teacher are personally concerned with. This might involve introducing a social problem such as human rights (for a teacher who belongs to the organization Amnesty International) or famine in Africa (for an ex-Peace Corps teacher who previously taught in Somalia). This approach would be characterized as teacher-driven, as top-down (teacher to students) and might result in courses or lessons titled "An Introduction to Amnesty International" or "Food and Famine in Africa". The strength of the course would be in teacher commitment through harnessing the personal knowledge, experience and enthusiasm of the teacher him/herself.

A fourth option related to this would be to focus on issues that the students themselves are concerned with. This might involve issues of authority, freedom and responsibility (school dress rules vs students' right to choose) or issues of health and environment (smoking, AIDS, recycling at school), all the while attempting to link these to problems in the wider world. This approach would be characterized as student-driven, as bottom-up (students to teacher) and might result in a course or study unit called "Student Issues". The strength of the course would be student relevance through harnessing concerns arising directly from students' lives.

A fifth option relates to Bamford's suggestion of using topics which are raised in the foreign language coursebook. Though social issues are often quite rare in some textbooks, other texts are increasingly including language teaching topics which deal in some way with global education topics. This approach might therefore involve students in studying issues of intolerance and genocide (perhaps a language teaching lesson with a reading passage from the diary of Anne Frank) or of Third World poverty and development (perhaps a listening comprehension exercise about Mother Teresa), provided of course that the teacher extends his/her treatment of the issue beyond the "textbook-topic-as-pretext-solely-for-language-practice" mode. This approach would be characterized as textbook-driven, as top-down (text to students) and would focus on predetermined textbook lessons provided by materials writers. The strength of this approach is pre-packaged language, since the work of adapting the issue for the purposes of language study (the drawing up of comprehension questions, grammar and vocabulary exercises, discussion questions, etc.) has already been done by the textbook writer.

The sixth option Bamford refers to is when an issue is brought to the class in the form of a newspaper article. This would therefore involve students in studying current events. This might include language lessons on topics such as war and peace (through news articles on the



Gulf War of 1991) or democracy and totalitarianism (through magazine articles on the fall of the Berlin Wall or the transformation of the USSR/CIS). It could also involve teachers in selecting global issue topics for the language class based on annual international days. Language lessons could thus be planned by the calendar to coincide with a number of world problems - human rights (on International Human Rights Day December 10), women's issues (on International Women's Day March 8), the United Nations (on UN Day October 24) or environmental activism (on Earth Day April 22). Teaching these issues on or before these dates would keep students up with current news and enable them to follow foreign language media coverage of these dates. This approach would be characterized then as media-driven, as either top-down (teacher or media to students) or bottom-up (students to teacher, depending on whether it's the students who are bringing the news items into class) and might result in courses titled "Current Events in English" or "World Issues on the Calendar". The strength of this approach is news-relevance through teaching about current topics attracting international attention.

In trying to answer our question of "What global issues should language instructors teach? Where should we start?", we have uncovered a number of options, each with its own dynamics, strengths and weaknesses. As we have seen, these options for choosing which world problems or social issues to deal with in language classes may arise from a variety of sources: from issues of global importance, local community concerns, the teacher's own involvement and experience, student interests, textbook coverage or current events in the mass media.

## 6 TEACHING ONE SOCIAL ISSUE OR ALL SOCIAL ISSUES

**If we're going to get involved in teaching about world problems in language classes, is it better to try to teach about all the issues or to focus on just one issue in more depth?**

One of the basic options here concerns teaching for breadth or depth. If we want students to have a broad general knowledge of a range of important world issues then we should aim for a broad survey of world problems with a limited amount of basic information about each. This option would provide students with a stimulating variety of learning topics and a broad base of varied vocabulary. If, on the other hand, we prefer our students to work intensively on language and learning skills through concentrated work on just one or two topics, then we should choose to organize our syllabus such that our students acquire a deep, thorough knowledge about one

particular issue. This would have the advantage of developing in students more sophisticated language and cognitive skills through a deeper analysis of a complex issue while making up in content vocabulary recycling for the vocabulary breadth of a global issues survey course. This is a choice for the teacher, though by no means an either-or dichotomy. A teacher might therefore prefer to run students through a "Survey of World Problems" language course in the first semester then go on to concentrate in depth on one particular issue, for example "human rights", in the second semester.

Teachers who begin with one particular issue they feel confident about teaching may worry about getting "stuck" in that issue and losing sight of other important world problems. What do you do if you start off teaching about the environment but also want your students to learn about war and peace or refugees, for example? Interestingly, given the interdependent nature of our global system, this problem is not as big as one would think. The reason is that world problems have an uncanny way of blending into each other. Racism, famine, environmental pollution and refugees, for example, may on the surface seem to be totally unrelated problems. Yet, like parts in a jigsaw puzzle, global issues such as these are often linked to each other in a direct cause and effect relation. Prejudice and racism in one country, for example, may produce a suppression of human rights. This may lead to war. War disrupts the environment. It also produces refugees. These crowd into camps. Refugee camps often breed sickness and malnutrition. This may result in famine. Famine may cause... and so on in a continuous cycle onto countless other issues.

Thus, while a language teaching unit on the 1991 Iraq-Kuwait Gulf War may seem on the surface to focus on the theme of war and peace, a little study soon reveals how this war (like any war) is inherently tied up with such varied issues as environmental pollution (the Persian Gulf oil spill; burning oil wells), social inequality (rich Kuwait beside poor Iraq), prejudice (Iraqi university students beaten up in the US; Palestinians beaten up in Kuwait), foreign aid (previous arms sales to Iraq by the US, Chinese, French and Russia) and refugees (the plight of the Kurds in Iraq).

While some language teachers are comfortable choosing one world problem and seeing where it leads, others may want to be more systematic in designing courses to teach effectively about global issues. Fortunately, much of the groundwork in devising comprehensive frameworks for the systematic study of the world's problems has already been done by such global educators as Kniep (1987) and Pike & Selby (1988). Where most of us become confused from the jumble of

world problems which bombard us daily on TV and in the newspaper, global education has managed to reach a rough consensus whereby all global issues can be sorted into four key categories: peace and conflict, human rights, development issues (North-South & Third World issues) and the environment. Sample content models specifying how particular world problems and social issues - whether literacy, sexism, terrorism or population - can be ordered into these four categories are therefore now available. One of the more comprehensive of these is a content model of global issues for high school level drawn up for a British GCSE World Studies curriculum illustrated in Pike & Selby (1988).

A final aspect of this question concerns whether we look at the teaching of global issues as product or as process. A product-based approach is knowledge-oriented. Here, the goal of the course, unit or lesson is the teaching of content - perhaps a lesson about Anne Frank, a unit on recycling or an entire course on world problems. In each of these cases, the students will learn about one or more particular issues and will come away with knowledge about certain world problems.

In contrast, a process-based approach is skills-oriented. In this approach, the class may choose, for example, to focus on only one particular social issue such as apartheid or world hunger for the entire course. Rather than aiming at teaching this issue solely as content, a process-based approach would treat the issue as a case study. Here, the goal, in addition to learning about a particular social issue, would be the acquisition and practice of global education skills such as critical thinking, logical analysis, research skills and seeing problems from multiple perspectives. Rather than coming away from the course with non-transferable knowledge about one particular issue, students would come away from their case study having acquired the skills and know-how needed to analyze any world problem and seek viable solutions. Though both product-based and process-based approaches have their places in the teacher's repertoire of global education approaches, it is important to stress that the process-based approach, even when focussed narrowly on one particular case study, is an enabling approach aiming at student autonomy and empowerment. "Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach a man to fish and he will feed himself for life" goes the saying. In the same way, this product/process distinction can be summarized as "teach students a world issue and they'll understand that issue (product); teach them how to analyze world problems and they'll be able to deal with whatever problems they face now and into the 21st century (process)".

## 7 LANGUAGE TEACHERS' LACK OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT GLOBAL ISSUES

**Global education aims at teaching young people about world problems such as war and peace, environmental issues, human rights and Third World development. Yet all of these are very complex issues requiring specialized knowledge from fields such as science, economics, politics and geography. How can language teachers deal with these topics when they have no special training in these fields? How can they teach language students about world problems when they know little about these problems themselves?**

Many teachers are put off teaching about world problems and foreign cultures because of their lack of knowledge about these areas. "We can't teach global issues", the argument goes, "because we don't know anything about them." Three points can be made in reply to this complaint, touching upon the areas of self development, teacher training and the role of the teacher.

### (a) Self-Development

Part of being a good teacher means being a good learner. To remain a good teacher requires constant learning and continual efforts to expand one's knowledge. A novice teacher of English, for example, when asked by a student "When do you use 'I will' and when do you use 'I'm going to' to express the future?" will go off and learn the answer, thus becoming a better and more effective teacher. A Shakespearian scholar asked to teach a course in 19th century English literature or an English "conversation" teacher asked to teach a course on reading skills will similarly make the effort to learn a new dimension of their field in order to guarantee that their students get the best education possible.

Looked at in this way, teaching by definition requires teachers to continually learn new concepts and skills. Indeed, language education especially demands a high degree of self development. As new ideas come along, whether new approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching, new methods such as Silent Way or new technologies such as language laboratories or computers, language teachers around the world have constantly made the effort to keep up with new developments in the field and have considered this an inevitable yet stimulating part of the job. Global education then is no exception. While it does require language teachers to expand their knowledge of world issues and foreign peoples, it also offers an

exciting chance to explore a whole new approach to education which has as its mission to prepare young people with the knowledge, skills and commitment required by world citizens for the solution of global problems.

The breadth of the field of global education, however, should in no way be minimized. The issues covered range from scientific problems such as ozone destruction to economic issues such as Third World debt and from political issues such as disarmament to moral issues such as racism. For many language teachers, the goal to be knowledgeable about world geography, major world cultures and complex social issues ranging from the environment and human rights to war and world poverty often appears totally unrealistic for themselves, let alone for their students. Yet, almost as important as achieving the goal is beginning on the path. As one language educator has put it:

*“Quite obviously, in our complex world it is almost impossible to be conversant with each and every social issue facing humanity. However, if one believes, as Socrates stated, that ‘the unexamined life is not worth living,’ then it seems that it would behoove each and every individual to make a concerted effort to learn as much about his or her world as possible. In a similar vein, it seems that if an educator truly cares about fully educating his/her students, then he/she will not shy away from helping them learn about key social issues”* (Totten 1986).

Practicing language teachers, then, who are interested in learning about global issues and global education should begin with their own self-development. Numerous books are now available to help with this.

For basic information about world problems and global issues, teachers can turn to a variety of primers to get them started. These include “The State of the World Atlas” (Kidron & Smith 1991), “Guide to the World Today” (Segal 1988), “State of the World” (Brown et al; annual) and “Catching Up With a Changing World - A Primer on World Affairs” (Kenworthy). For those teachers interested in exploring particular issues further, specialized books are also readily available ranging from titles such as “Inside the Third World” (Harrison 1987) and “Human Rights” (Totten & Kleg 1989) to “The Blue Peter Green Book” (Bronze et al 1991) and “12 Myths About World Hunger” (Lappe & Collins 1986). Complete illustrated book sets on global issues have also now been published such as Rourke’s “World Issue Series” (19 books on such issues as Refugees, The Arms Trade, World Health and The Energy Crisis) and Franklin Watts

“Issues Update Series” (covering topics such as The Palestinians, Acid Rain, Famine in Africa and AIDS).

Numerous books also exist to help language teachers teach these world issues in their language classes. These range from teacher handbooks such as “World Concerns and the United Nations: Model Teaching Units” (UN 1986) and “The Teaching of Contemporary World Issues” (Harris 1986) to level-specific texts such as “Global Issues in the Elementary Classroom” (SSEC 1988). For language teachers interested in teaching about specific world issues, new texts now exist such as “Teaching About Human Rights” (Shiman 1987) and “Teaching About Food and Hunger” (Otero & Smith 1989).

Similarly, a number of excellent books are now in print for language teachers interested in exploring the field of global education. For a general introduction to the field, numerous teacher handbooks exist. Among the best are titles such as “Global Teacher, Global Learner” (Pike & Selby 1988), “World Studies 8-13” (Fisher & Hicks 1985), “Comprehensive Peace Education” (Reardon 1988), “Internationalizing Your School” (Rosengren et al 1983) and “Next Steps in Global Education” (Kniep 1987).

Self-development for learning about global issues and global education does not have to limit itself to book learning. Educational seminars and overseas study tours also offer powerful learning experiences for those eager to raise their global awareness and understanding of world problems. Numerous global education organizations run annual seminars and workshops explaining the basics of global education to novice teachers. Typical of such organizations is the American group “Educators for Social Responsibility” which annually offers summer courses for teachers on topics such as “Multicultural Education”, “Teaching for Social Responsibility” and “Creative Conflict Resolution”. Overseas global education study tours provide a unique way to learn at first-hand about world problems through foreign travel. Participation in such tours takes teachers to countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Guatemala and Nicaragua and involves them in visiting village health clinics, rural literacy programs, leprosy missions and city slums. Upon returning home from a tour like this, most teachers return to the classroom eager to break down the myths and stereotypes they’ve overcome, to share the new knowledge they’ve learned and to integrate their experiences into their teaching.

#### (b) Teacher Training

While numerous exciting materials and courses exist to help practicing language teachers

learn about global issues and global education, there is still an urgent need to include courses on global education in undergraduate and graduate teacher training programs. The importance of this is brought out clearly by a recent survey of American global education teacher trainers (Merryfield 1991). When asked to describe the most critical issues they face in preparing teachers for global and international education, these trainers identified four major concerns: (1) most teachers have little or no knowledge of global perspectives; (2) many teachers feel global concerns are either irrelevant or threatening, with some teachers locked into a “nationalistic mind-set” believing that all content must be taught from an American perspective; (3) many teachers do not believe that global education is essential for quality education and (4) little leadership or support is offered for global education in schools or school districts.

A key challenge, then, for the language teaching profession is to press for the integration of global education as a key component of language teacher training courses. Until this is done, language teachers will be forced to work on their own in developing the knowledge and skills needed by professional global language educators.

### (c) The Role of the Teacher

A final but important point to note in talking about the need for teacher knowledge of global issues in language classes concerns our conception of the role of the teacher and his/her approach in dealing with content. Here, there are basically two models. The first concerns the “teacher as expert” and sees the role of the teacher as being the all-knowing dispenser of expert knowledge to ignorant students. The second model could be termed the “teacher as fellow enquirer” and sees the role of the teacher as being a learner/explorer along with the students.

While we have argued above about (1) the need for language teachers to increase their knowledge through self-study about world problems and social issues and (2) the importance of incorporating global education components into foreign language teacher training programs, it is important to stress that, when taken too far, the “teacher as expert” model of teaching can actually have negative consequences. When the teacher is “the expert”, for example, students can tend to ignore the knowledge of fellow students, focus their energies on finding out “the right answer” from the all-knowing teacher rather than researching their own answers, and develop passive attitudes towards learning.

Where the teacher sees his or her role as “fellow enquirer”, however, the tone of the class can change drastically. Suddenly, teacher and students become co-learners, working together in

the foreign language classroom to explore world problems, understand their causes and identify ways of working to solve them. Instead of intimidating students with their comprehensive knowledge, then, enquiry teachers can not only escape from the burden of always having to be “the expert” but can also join in the excitement of learning with their students. This approach thus can unleash student energy and empower learners to tackle social issues in the foreign language with the teacher’s help and guidance.

## 8 THE NEED FOR EXPERT QUALIFICATIONS

**Granted that language teachers can gain a basic knowledge of world problems through self-study and other means, does this alone qualify them to teach global issues? The average language teacher’s background is in education, TESOL or applied linguistics. Wouldn’t we need to be experts in international relations or environmental science to properly teach about complex world problems such as rain forest destruction, Third World debt or war and peace?**

Like the previous question, this question raises a common concern of many language teachers - the problem of having adequate knowledge of complex issues in a new and bewildering field. The concern is valid, yet it is important to put it in perspective. No-one would seriously suggest that language educators must be experts in theoretical linguistics or educational psychology before they can properly teach a second or foreign language. At the same time, no-one would deny that at least some knowledge of these fields is vital in promoting effective language learning. The truth is that good language teachers know a great deal about a number of important fields - linguistics, psychology, sociology, education - and continually strive to keep up with new developments in each field. Becoming an expert in each of these fields is not only unnecessary, but also impossible.

There is thus no need to have a PhD in international relations before beginning to teach language with a global perspective (though of course this wouldn’t hurt!). However, a global education approach to language teaching does require that teachers have at a minimum a basic knowledge of global issues and of the field of global education itself.

Knowledge of global issue content need not present an overwhelming obstacle, however. For one thing, good language teachers are generalists who already have some knowledge of world



events and international trends. Furthermore, global issues of peace and human rights, social justice and the environment already exist in certain areas of mainstream language teaching, from the study of newspaper articles on toxic waste in current events classes to oral training in speech and debate on such topics as Third World debt, from the study of the destruction of the ozone layer in academic study skill classes to the study of oppression and social inequality in George Orwell's novels in literature classes.

Two relevant models concerning content knowledge for global issues language teachers already exist within our profession. One is the area of culture teaching. While no-one would argue that language teachers must be trained cultural anthropologists, current thinking in the profession stresses that language teachers should at least be equipped to teach basic information about the target language culture (Seelye 1984). At the same time, language teachers are cautioned in teaching about the foreign culture to avoid giving false information or perpetuating misleading stereotypes, to be judicious in the use of first-language explanation and to beware of concentrating on the unusual, the bizarre and the esoteric to the exclusion of a sound understanding of basic cultural characteristics (Chastain 1976). All these points concerning the teaching of culture apply equally to the teaching of global issues in language classrooms.

The second model for global issue language educators is the teacher of languages for special purposes - Russian for Diplomats, English for Science and Technology, Japanese for Business, etc. Instructors of these subjects are first and foremost language teachers, not subject specialists, yet to do their job properly they must immerse themselves to a certain degree in the content subject they're preparing their students for. Instead of assuming the mantle of authority in their classes, they take the role of facilitator, supplying linguistic knowledge to help the students express specialist concepts while learning about the field as they teach. Teachers of "English for Engineers" thus don't have to be engineers themselves, but must know the basics of engineering and be able to help their students acquire the language skills they need to do effective engineering in the foreign language. In the same way, global language educators do not have to be experts on disarmament diplomacy or Third world agriculture to teach about peace and world hunger in their classes, but they must know basic facts about these issues and be able to help their students acquire the global skills they need to become concerned, socially-responsible world citizens.

Good language teachers constantly seek to update their teaching techniques and subject matter knowledge. Global education presents an exciting challenge to language teachers to

widen their own knowledge of the world and its problems and to contribute, as language teachers, to enabling their students to work for a better world.

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