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“Global Issues in EFL” or “Understanding Globalization”? Which is Appropriate for Mainstream EFL Students in Japanese Universities?

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Global Issues (GI) or Global Education in EFL is now a well-established branch of the language-teaching field with strong interest groups both in JALT and IATEFL. It's advocates have made a very good case for integrating knowledge about, and advocacy of, peace, social justice, human

rights and the protection of the environment into the EFL classroom and have been creative in their use of materials of all kinds to promote their ideas. But is Global Issues an appropriate theme for mainstream English classes in Japan? This article presents a critique of the Global Studies in EFL approach and suggests an alternative way of helping students develop the knowledge, understanding and skills needed to become more globally aware “world citizens.” This approach-based on the presenter’s own Understanding Globalization course-draws on the interests that university students have in popular culture and the consumer and material world around them.

EFLで扱うグローバル問題やグローバル教育は、JALT、IATEFL両グループにおいては、熱心な指導者の下、今や語学教育では定評のある分野となっている。

平和、社会正義、人権擁護の立場からの知識と環境保護の立場からの見解をEFL授業の中でうまく絡み合わせ、より充実した指導となるため教材開発にも創意工夫をこらしてきた。

しかし、グローバル問題は日本で主流となる英語授業に適切なテーマなのだろうか？この論文はEFLが取り組むグローバルスタディの問題点を示唆し、学習目的を学生の知識向上とするか、あるいは「地球市民」を広範囲に意識するための理解力や能力向上とするかの二者択一案を提示している。

論文作成にあたっては、日々日常の中で学生が抱く関心事をフルに活用した発表者自身の「国際理解」関連の授業を基にした。

Introduction

Global Issues in ELT (hereafter GIEFL) is now a well-established branch of the language-teaching field with strong interest groups both in JALT and IATEFL. Its advocates have made a very good case for integrating knowledge about, and advocacy of, peace, human rights and the protection of the environment into the EFL classroom. And have made creative use of materials of all kinds to promote their ideas. This article asks two central questions. Is *Global Issues* an appropriate area of content for general English reading or communication classes--as *GI in EFL* proponents suggest--and is the GI approach to helping students become “world citizens” the best way to achieve this goal? The article goes on to suggest an alternative approach to educating students about globalization by tapping into their general interests and knowledge, as well as their position in the global economy as informed consumers and potential producers.

Basic goals of GIEFL advocates

Based on their online and journal publications, most GIEFL advocates--while divided on some issues--seem to broadly agree on the following set of beliefs about the role of the teacher and the types of content that should be introduced to EFL students in English classes. (See Appendix for websites on Global Issues)

1. Teachers should at minimum help and encourage students to become world citizens who are more aware of world problems and if possible encourage the development of activists who can help bring about social and political change.
2. Written and other materials used in most or all classes should introduce GI. Mainstream textbooks tend to be biased in favor of bland topics or

emphasize consumerism or trivia and should be supplemented or replaced with authentic materials or GI-oriented textbooks.

3. Materials and teaching methodology should foster critical thinking and debate and give students of all abilities the chance to discuss controversial issues.
4. Almost any GI topic or theme can be introduced with students of almost any level, provided teachers make an effort to customize and supplement materials in a creative way for their particular students.
5. Most students are genuinely interested in the kinds of topics which GI usually focuses on--war and peace, the environment, poverty, AIDS etc.
6. Students already get far too much exposure to the values of mainstream consumer society and these values are often found in typical textbooks.
7. Introducing GI into EFL education is not indoctrination but rather a balancing of the existing bias that is in regular textbooks and materials.
8. Native speaker teachers of English can and do provide students with information and ideas relating to GI that L1 teachers either cannot, or do not.
9. The opportunity to foster students understanding of important issues such as poverty, war, environment degradation, human rights and social justice etc., can be as important as other language related pedagogical concerns.

It is perhaps surprising that GIEFL proponents have until recently received relatively little critical attention from their peers in the overseas English teaching community given the nature of their pedagogical views. Indeed, only Trevor Sargent has taken issue in print with what he calls “advocacy-oriented

global education” in JALT’s own publication, *The Language Teacher* (2004). Part of the reason for this is that most EFL teachers--like most well traveled educational professionals--would probably agree with the broad goal of helping students become more aware of global issues. This may be especially true in Japan, where students are, or at least seem to be, apolitical to a degree that may be quite shocking to teachers new to the country. EFL instructors are thus unlikely to openly oppose the efforts of motivated GIEFL advocates, since in addition to sharing their ultimate goals, they may admire the latter’s energy and creativity. In some cases they may also feel some fear of being seen as politically conservative or too narrow in their focus on fostering skills at the expense of broadening students minds. Yet while few EFL teachers take issue with the GIEFL approach, the majority do not adopt it in any systematic way. In Japan for example, GI conferences attract a relatively modest audience, and as is common in any conference situation, the participants are largely addressing others who are proponents of the approach. Perhaps for this reason many EFL teachers in Japan may be unaware of the types of presentations that GIEFL proponents give. For example at the Peace as a Global Language Conference in Tokyo in 2003 (See Appendix) presentations included the following

- Incorporating the Global Refugee Crisis into Your Classroom
- Teaching Responsibility for Social Issues
- Masculinities and Violence in Schools: The Key Issues
- The Language of Female Power: Peace in Prehistory

- Building Global Awareness and Social Activism among Japanese College
- Protecting the Peacemakers: Teaching about HIV/AIDS
- Learning How to Learn: Utilizing Global Issues Toward Efficient Learning Structure in an Otherwise Conformist Culture
- Power Relations between Native English-Speaking Teachers and Japanese Students

From the descriptions of these presentations, it is not clear to what extent the material that is described by presenters is being used in their regular EFL classes. Nor is it clear how often it is used instead of more conventional EFL materials or texts. Nevertheless, one cannot help but be struck by the willingness of GIEFL advocates to introduce both information and ideas that are well outside the usual description of standard university or high school English class. In addition, as Sargent clearly documents, some of those in the GIEFL field in Japan not only consider promoting social activism to be an ideal, but are willing to shape their class syllabi and materials to help develop it, even if these classes are not elective ones (Sargent, 2004, 11-12)

Because critics of GIEFL are open to charges of political conservatism or of being narrow-minded in their approach to teaching in general, it is important to point out that the following critique is based primarily on pedagogical principles and the belief that EFL professionals need to adhere to the job guidelines under which they were hired and for which they have trained. As such there is no criticism here of adequately qualified GIEFL

instructors who want to teach about Global Issues to students with an appropriate level of English proficiency and who have chosen to take this class as an elective.

Some criticisms of the GIEFL approach in Japanese universities

1. Appropriateness of GI content in general English classes:

Perhaps the single most important critique of the GIEFL approach is that advocates are quite willing to introduce complex content even into classes defined as being either general English or “Oral Communication”. These classes are often mandatory and there is no reason to think that students want or expect anything other than to develop their basic speaking, listening or reading and writing skills. Complex content—which requires considerable background knowledge—is not appropriate for these classes. To the extent that content is introduced, it should be based on the students’ genuine interests, and as is the case with university students in almost any developed country, this is primarily the immediate world around them and the global popular culture of which they are a part. However, any content should be at a supplementary level, and should never shape the syllabus to fit an agenda, especially when the students lack both basic language skills or any background knowledge of the complex issues that a GIEFL instructor may choose to introduce.

2. Level of student interest in GI: While GIEFL advocates often give anecdotal evidence suggesting that students enjoy dealing with global issues, there is no hard evidence in any GI literature to suggest that a significant percentage of Japanese students are genuinely interested in global issues. Furthermore, of those who are somewhat interested, many might be equally

or more interested in issues such as comparative culture, intercultural communication, global popular culture. Why should these students be forced to confront issues that they would struggle to understand even in their L1 and why should they have to do this in their English classes?

3. The foreign language teacher as GI instructor: While surveys and anecdotal evidence may show Japanese students to be quite apolitical, they also show them to be strong supporters of pacifism and environmental protection. [Makita, 2001). They are thus hardly in need of more activities or materials designed to make them more conscious of the evils of war or environmental degradation. It is also highly questionable if this kind of instruction should come in their L2 from non-experts. After all, while many EFL instructors are well traveled and well educated, few have degrees in any field close to GI, such as Peace Education, International Relations etc. Thus while few would disagree that those with adequate English proficiency could benefit from studying some GI topics in the context of an elective content class taught by a teacher with some formal training in these areas, such teachers should not take the place of Japanese teachers who may be experts in these fields.

4. Suitability of global issues materials in regular EFL classes: GIEFL advocates are well aware of the difficult nature of many of their issues and have gone out of their way to make them understandable to lower level students. As such they acknowledge that these issues may be intrinsically complex and not easily accessible for most EFL students. If this is indeed the case, however, why do they focus on these issues when there are so many others topics that would be more accessible and potentially more enjoyable for most students? In their literature, advocates seem to take the view that almost any content can

be used with lower-intermediate students who make up the largest group within Japanese university English classes. Yet surely not every topic can be customized and made appropriate or accessible to such students and surely there are topics that do not fit within the bounds of a basic EFL class. From their publications, GIEFL advocates consider it acceptable to teach students in general classes about topics such as AIDS, global warming, Gender Issues and world poverty and also to promote social activism. Two examples of well-known textbooks used in Japan to teach regular classes are “Our World” and “You, me and the World,” [Peaty, 1990, 1997]. These texts, while skillfully designed to integrate GI issues into a four skills class, still appear contrived in their effort to make the difficult and complex easy to understand and palatable. In most cases, the topics presented such as Human Rights, Endangered Species and Gender Issues require too much background knowledge for students to be able to make sense of them. More importantly they cannot be a substitute for lower intermediate students who are still learning how to give personal information and talk about everyday matters, who would rarely be able to discuss these topics in their L1. In addition, while such books attempt to reduce the amount of difficult vocabulary, they cannot help but fail to make the topics either interesting or understandable to the very lower-intermediate students whom they target.

5. Implications of using GI materials in EFL classes: If GIEFL instructors are free to teach about complex GI issues, then how can those who make, develop and monitor the implementation of basic EFL classes object if a non-GIEFL teacher uses a general English class to, for example, teach the history of linguistics; make a case against the notion of global warming; promote liberation theology and radical Christianity or argue for sexual abstinence to prevent AIDS etc. Such topics

and viewpoints, might conceivably be of some interest when taught in elective classes by Japanese experts or offered in English to higher level English students hoping to study abroad. They are not, however, suitable for intermediate or lower level students in regular EFL classes. This is true no matter what efforts the instructor might claim to make them more understandable or to create comprehension and other interactive exercises that utilize the four skills. By contrast, a responsible EFL instructor who wants to introduce some content should be looking for the most accessible and intrinsically interesting materials that he or she can find, consistent with the overall goal of helping students develop their basic skills and of motivating them to become effective learners.

GI has clearly established itself in ELT and its basic philosophy and validity as a field is not under question. Perhaps the strongest argument made by GIEFL advocates is that GI can be made just as interesting for students, when presented in a comprehensible way, as the popular culture topics found in regular textbooks can be. As one GIEFL proponent argued, with some validity, all English teachers “need to use reading passages, dialogues and discussions in [their] teaching, so why not design these with content that informs students of important world issues and challenges them to consider solutions?” [Kawata, 1996] This, however, is a case for introducing GI into reading or content classes and to some degree into intermediate or higher level conversation or four skills classes. It is not an argument for making it a major feature of an ordinary communication class and it is certainly not an argument for overtly promoting activism or bringing in complex and controversial issues. There is strong evidence, however, that this is precisely what many GIEFL advocates are doing.

An alternative approach to promoting critical thinking about globalization and global issues in content based EFL classes

If the GIEFL approach to fostering a sense of world citizenship in the Japan context is indeed as flawed as has been argued here, what is an alternative? One possible method, developed by the writer is an elective course, called “Understanding Globalization and its Effect on Our Everyday Life.” (hereafter UG). Whereas the GIEFL approach tends to focus attention on individuals and societies that are far removed from that of the students and to generally reject the values of materialism, consumerism and western pop culture that many students have embraced, the UG one, embraces students’ real interests and uses them as a springboard for further investigation. Unlike GI, it does not presuppose a set list of pressing world issues and does not seek to overtly “transform” students or to challenge and shape their values in a particular way. Rather it aims to motivate and interest them by showing them how globalization in its many incarnations affects their everyday lives as consumers, tourists and workers. In UG, students look at topics such as the fast food, movie, music and fashion industries and examine changes in the tourist and theme park industries. For example, those with a strong attraction to a famous and international star can look at the way in which sports and celebrities are increasingly internationalized and marketed as brands or products. Under this approach then, students can explore the interests they already have, and see how the complex forces of globalization actually work as well as how they can shape and sometimes blight the lives of people in both developed and developing countries. Students may or may not reach the same conclusions about the pressing need for “a collective world view” advocated by those who teach

GI (Dyer & Bushell, 1996), but they will enhance their critical thinking skills language skills by pursuing topics of intrinsic personal interest while also developing a global perspective. The differences between the two approaches can be seen more directly by looking at the comparison chart below (table 1).

Teaching the *Understanding Globalization* class

The UG approach outlined above has been incorporated into an elective for university students at or near the intermediate level or above. As with GI, the materials used are mostly authentic and largely taken from Internet sites dealing with globalization issues. However the list of Web sites at the author’s homepage (see Appendix) includes links to sites dealing with the spread of global popular culture--music, sports, branded goods etc--as well as the impact of globalization on everyday life. In class, students are not expected to give un-thought out opinions on complex issues, but rather are encouraged to slowly develop the skills and knowledge needed to talk in English about contemporary issues and the ways in which globalization affects their every day life. Unlike many Global issues, which are often technical and far removed from the lives of the average student, UG topics are likely to be of interest to most students in the class since they must be related in some way to their actual lives in Japan. Among the most popular topics are new communication technologies, the export of Japan’s popular culture, theme parks, hobby-related tourism, the impact of foreign fast food and mega stores, the global overseas education business, celebrity-endorsed brands, low priced clothing stores selling goods made in China or South East Asia and the worldwide marketing of hip-hop culture etc. The teacher does not set a goal of developing world citizens and activists, but attempts only to help students see how the very

Table 1. Comparing the goals and approaches of GIEFL and UG courses

Issue or Question	Global Issues In EFL	Understanding Globalization
What are the non-language related goals of this approach?	Create “World Citizens” and develop awareness of world problems so that some students will go on to become activists.	Develop students’ understanding of the way in which the global economy works and the nature of globalization.
In what context and in what way is the content taught?	Can and should be introduced in any type of class—from oral communication to content.	Should be taught only in dedicated content classes or within short units in higher-level reading classes.
What level of competency in English should be required?	Can be adapted to almost any level include false beginners.	Most appropriate for intermediate and above –ideally in dedicated elective content classes.
What kind of texts or materials can be used?	Authentic materials from the mass media and NGOs or an EFL texts focusing on GI themes such as poverty, war, environment, human rights, social justice etc.	Internet and other authentic materials dealing with the spread of global popular culture—music, sports, branded goods etc., as well as the impact of globalization on everyday life.
What long-term impact on students is expected or hoped for?	Students will become critical thinkers. The most motivated will become active global citizens who are willing to take concrete action to oppose the negative impact of global corporations and to help solve economic, environmental and political problems in their societies and beyond. Students will question and possibly reject their own consumerist tendencies	Students will have a deeper understanding of how the global economy; how it affects their lives in Japan and the special role of multi-national corporations in shaping the lives of workers and their families in many developing countries. They will understand how corporate advertising targets young people in order to create brand loyalty.

products and cultural artifacts that attract them can be part of a global economy and culture that too often ignores the interests of workers and their families in developing countries. Students will also begin to understand how corporations and advertising agencies target young people and create brand loyalty for expensive products made with cheap labor in the very Asian countries that they might visit. Such a course will also have difficult vocabulary and concepts which require the same type of customization as that used by GI teachers. But these will not be forced on students barely out of high school who are expecting a standard English class.

Conclusion

Until recently, GIEFL advocates have received remarkably little criticism from their peers, many of whom may--like the author--share their interest in content-based teaching designed to help students broaden their world view. As the arguments and evidence presented here suggest, and as Sargent (2004) has shown, there are a range of pedagogical, and ethical flaws in the underlying logic and rationale of those who advocate introducing global issues in a systematic way into Japanese university EFL classes. An alternative approach--such as the Understanding Globalization course outlined here--which is based on students' broad interests, experience and their actual English proficiency level, may provide a better route to the larger goal of helping develop the critical thinking and other skills and knowledge required to become an engaged world citizen.

References

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- Makita, T. (2001). *Japanese Views of War and Peace: Continuity and Weathering*. This is the result of a large scale survey of Japanese people's views on a wide range of issues related to war and peace. This and other similar studies suggest that Japanese young people are among the worlds most anti-war and pacifistic young people. <www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/bcri-fr/h15-f1.html> A Sokka Gakai survey taken in 1997 suggested that around 75% of Japanese youth are “absolutely opposed to war.” See also <www.sokagakkai.info/html/news1/newsletters1/97newsltrs1/n1_970815a.html>
- Peaty, D. (1990). *Our World*. Tokyo: Eichosha.
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Appendix

Information about current and past thinking in the GIEFL world came articles and general information from the following GI websites:

- Japan Association for Language Teaching Global Issues SIG <www.jalt.org/global/sig/index.html >
- <Global Issues as Content for English Language Teaching in Taiwan <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/jhoy/noframes/j1home.htm>
- IATEFL Global Issues SIG Contacts Page <www.countryschool.com/gicontac.htm>
- Peace as a Global Language Conference 2003
Conference Dates: September 27th - 28th, 2003
Location: Seisen University <www.elcalendar.com/PGL2003>