

Refugees and Human Rights: Classroom Issues

Fiona Eastley
Doshisha University

Reference Data:

Eastley, F. (2005). Refugees and Human Rights: Classroom Issues. In K. Bradford-Watts, C. Ikeguchi, & M. Swanson (Eds.) *JALT2004 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

This paper illustrates a lesson that shows how EFL students can learn about refugees. The lesson introduces the concept of refugees and encourages students to consider the reasons why people become refugees and the difficulties these people face. The students look at the refugee crisis from both the view of a refugee and also from the viewpoint of nations around the world. Using a content-based approach, students learn to express their feelings and opinions through English, while also learning about the plight of refugees.

この論文は英語を母国語としない学生が、どのような方法で難民について学ぶことができるかを示すものである。この授業では学生に難民とは何かという概念を紹介し、なぜ難民が生ずるかや難民の直面する困難苦労について考えさせるように仕向ける。学生は難民の危機を、難民の視点から見ると同時に、世界中の他の国民の視点からも見ることになる。意味のある事象を扱う学習法なので、学生は自分の意見や印象を英語で表現することを学ぶだけでなく、難民の窮状についても学習することができる。

As the university population of students in Japan continues to decline, universities and language educators are increasingly being expected to offer a greater variety of classes to encourage enrollments. The number of eighteen year olds in Japan dropped 25% from 1992 to 2000 and is expected to continue to decline (The Asahi Shimbun Japan Almanac 2002). Content-based courses involving global education can provide university language courses with a new look current to today's world and issues.

Since the early 1980s the role of content-based classes in teaching English as a foreign language has become increasingly apparent. Some of the first research examining how content-based instruction could enhance acquisition of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the university level was carried out in Canada by Edwards, Wesche, Krashen, Clement, and Kruidenier, (1984). Content-based instruction started influencing the field of EFL instruction in Japan in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Cates (1990) stated that global education was bringing a new perspective to the language classroom, school curricula, and the world of applied linguistics. Dyer and Bushell (1996) called this growing worldwide trend of using content-based instruction *global education*. Content-based instruction gives students a chance to develop new skills and also use the skills they already have in order to discuss, evaluate, and problem-solve issues of world concern. Educators such as Cates (2004) consider that one of the roles of educators is to help students learn about their multicultural world and the problems it faces. Teaching global issues within EFL

classes creates an opportunity to give students an immersion in English through learning about important world issues. Jacobs (1995) describes this approach as “a return to a humanistic view of educationists' role as professionals who seek to educate students to be participative, well-rounded citizens” (p.17).

Topics taught can be chosen by the teacher to examine current issues, events, and concerns, or reflect the experiences of the teacher. Topics can also be chosen that relate to the students' area of major study so that the language classroom is used to discuss issues taught in the students' first language in other faculties. Students can also discuss in class what topics they feel are relevant to them and negotiate with the teacher what topics will be addressed.

This paper discusses a lesson where students learn about the plight and concerns of refugees and the difficulties countries face in trying to cope with this crisis.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that there were approximately 17 million refugees in the world as of January 1st, 2004 (UNHCR, 2005). Many students are unaware of why people become refugees and what difficulties they face. This lesson aims at getting students to examine their own knowledge about refugees and to discuss the issues concerning refugees from a global viewpoint. Also through the use of role-plays students can experience the feeling of loss and helplessness that many refugees feel.

Objectives

This lesson is part of a series of lessons comprising a unit on refugees and human rights. For other lessons in this series please see Eastley (2003, 2004a, 2004b). The lesson here is presented as a stand-alone lesson so if used as part of a larger unit some changes will need to be made. This 90-minute lesson on refugee awareness taught to a class of 25 first year university students studying within the faculty of contemporary social studies had the following four objectives:

1. Students will build a definition of *refugee* through brainstorming and compare it to the definition provided by the UNHCR.
2. Students will learn about several reasons why people become refugees.
3. Students will experience the plight and feelings of refugees through role-plays.
4. Students will discuss ways in which countries can help refugees.

Materials

The teacher needs to prepare situation cards (see Appendix 1) so that there are enough situations for approximately a quarter of the class. The situation cards are numbered and each describes a situation that would force a person to become a refugee. The teacher also needs to prepare small slips of paper (enough for one to be handed to each student), where a quarter of the slips have a number written which matches a number on each situation card, and the others are blank.

Class Outline

The class begins with the teacher asking students to brainstorm what the word *refugee* means to them and consider what type of people become or are refugees. Students can be asked individually, in pairs, or small groups. The teacher then goes around the class eliciting different answers from each student until all of the different comments are given and written on the board. In higher-level classes students can be asked to give a definition of the word *refugee* using simple English. In lower-level classes the teacher writes a definition of this word on the board, e.g. "Refugees are people who have left their home country because they are scared that they will die or lose their freedom if they stay" (UNHCR, 2005).

The students are then asked to brainstorm what situations can lead to a person becoming a refugee. Students are asked to think of at least three situations. Students then walk around the class and ask other students for their ideas. Depending on the class level the teacher may need to give some helping phrases e.g. *What's a reason why a person becomes a refugee?* or *What situations cause people to become refugees?* Students are encouraged to expand their ideas and give explanations regarding why a particular situation will lead to people becoming refugees. Once students have talked to several classmates, all students return to their seats and several situations are written on the board. The teacher may add and explain other situations, especially those included in the situation cards.

The students are then told that a refugee camp is going to be set up in the classroom and some of the students will become refugees. A small area in the corner of the classroom is then sectioned off with tables or chairs. Inside the area is empty.

Each student is then given a slip of paper. Students with a numbered paper tell their number to the teacher and the teacher gives them the corresponding situation card. The student then reads the card aloud and then moves to the refugee camp. This continues until all the students with numbered cards are in the refugee camp.

One of the remaining students is chosen as a spokesperson for the refugees. The remaining students are then divided into countries that have a programme for accepting large numbers of refugees such as *Canada* and *Australia* and countries that accept small numbers of refugees such as *Japan* and countries that have poorer economies. Each group is then given information about their country's attitude towards refugees and yearly number of refugees accepted. The countries are then told that there is a serious refugee crisis and that they must decide on their country's plan of action. While the countries decide on their action plan, the refugee spokesperson goes to the refugee camp and asks the refugees what their needs and wants are. After about ten minutes of discussion the spokesperson tells the country groups what the refugees want and need. The country group then discuss what they are willing to do and then report to the spokesperson, who in turn reports back to the refugees. This process may need to be repeated several times until both the country groups and the refugees are satisfied, or all refugees have moved out of the refugee camp. Depending on the class English level, the countries can be given scenarios of what might happen with particular decisions they make. For example by accepting the refugees they will have to provide housing, health, education, employment, etc. It is possible that the lesson ends with the refugees remaining in the camp.

Extension Activities

- 1) Class time can be spent researching countries that accept refugees and also countries from which people flee.
- 2) Students could research particular countries as homework then present their information to the class.
- 3) Students can write their feelings about the lesson in reflection books.
- 4) Students could research famous refugees and investigate why these people left their country, and if they were able to return to their home country.
- 5) Students could develop community education posters that help the community understand the plight of refugees.
- 6) Students could research groups in Japan that support refugees.

Concluding remarks and troubleshooting

This lesson has been used successfully with first year university students with upper intermediate English skills studying within a predominately content-based course in the social studies faculty of a Japanese university. The lesson is not suitable for young students, but may be suitable for high school students studying within a high level intensive English course.

The teacher may encounter several difficulties with this lesson depending on the individual class. One difficulty is that students may try to complete the activity in Japanese. To prevent this, students need to have a suitable level of English so they can discuss the issues, present ideas, and argue their opinion. Students with a lower level of skill may need to be given a preparation lesson beforehand in which they are introduced to structures and forms that will be needed in the lesson. Students may also need practice learning how to give opinions and respond to concerns or complaints if this area has not been covered in class previously.

Another problem is that students may not want to enter the *refugee camp*, or those that enter may soon get irritated as they are in a small enclosed space and there are no chairs. Part of the lesson is to show the hardships refugees face, therefore it is expected that students may get a little irritated. It is important for the teacher to be aware of any irritation and to limit time spent in the *refugee camp* to a maximum of about fifteen minutes. One other problem the teacher may encounter is that some students might not feel the topic is relevant to them, or the students do not show any interest in learning about refugees. This situation can also be improved by asking students to research areas of their choice concerning refugees or to research about situations concerning refugees in Japan.

References

- Cates, K. (1990). Teaching for a better world: Global issues in language education. *The Language Teacher*, 14 (5), 3-5.
- Cates, K. (2004). Becoming a global teacher: Ten steps to an international classroom. *The Language Teacher*, 28 (7), 31-35.
- Dyer, B., & Bushell, B. (1996). World issues or a global perspective? *The Language Teacher*, 20 (11), 10-16.
- Eastley, F.E. (2003). Refugee issues in the classroom. *Peace as a Global Language-1 (PGL-1) Conference Proceedings*.
- Eastley, F.E. (2004a). Human rights and problem solving in EFL classrooms. *Peace as a Global Language-2 (PGL-2) Conference Proceedings*.
- Eastley, F.E. (2004b). Some peace in the classroom. *The Language Teacher*, 28 (9), 20-21.
- Edwards, H., Wesche, M., Krashen, S., Clement, R., & Kruidenier, B. (1984). Second language acquisition through subject-matter learning: A study of sheltered psychology classes at the University of Ottawa. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 41 (2), 268-82.
- Jacobs, G. (1995). *Language use or language usage? Global Issues in Language Education*. 18. p. 17. [Online]. Available: <www.jalt.org/global/18Lan.htm>.
- The Asahi Shimbun Japan Almanac (2002). p. 246. Tokyo: The Asahi Shimbun Company, 2001.
- UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency (2005). [Online]. Available: <www.unhcr.ch>.

Appendix 1

Situation Cards

Number 1

Your village was destroyed by fire. All your belongings are gone and there is no food. If you stay you will starve. You must run away.

Number 2

A new government has taken over your country and they are killing many people, especially teachers, scientists, and politicians. As you are a teacher, the soldiers will come looking for you soon. If you stay at your house they will surely come and find you.

Number 3

Your country has had no rainfall for many months and all the crops have died. There is only a little food and many people are dying of starvation. Many people have decided to walk many kilometers to a neighboring country to look for food. You have decided to join these people.

Number 4

Many people have disappeared from your town. These people were all believers of the same religion as you. You are worried that, because of your religion, you will disappear too. You have decided to escape late at night, but you don't know where to go.

Number 5

There has been a massive earthquake and your house has collapsed. There is no water, gas, or electricity available. It is winter and very cold. You must go somewhere, but all the other houses in your small country have also collapsed. You must go somewhere safe.

Number 6

You are from an ethnic minority different to the government of your country. The government said all people like you are enemies of the country. If you don't leave you will be captured by your government, tortured, and maybe killed.