

Religion in the ELT classroom: Teachers' perspectives

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The appropriateness of certain discussion topics in language learning settings is an important consideration for teachers, and one of these topics is religion. This paper reports on a survey of nearly 300 ELT professionals to ascertain their views on the discussion or mentioning of religion in the language classroom. Respondents were questioned on their feelings regarding the discussion or mentioning of religion in class; this datum was cross-analyzed with the respondents' indicated religious beliefs and countries/regions where they teach. In addition to gathering quantitative data in the form of multiple-choice opinion questions, the survey asked respondents to expand on their answers by providing written commentary which was examined for emerging themes and patterns of thought.

言語習得の場で提起される話題に妥当性があるかどうかは、教師にとって重要な問題である。その1つとして挙げられるのが「宗教」である。本論は約300名のEFL及びESL教師を対象とした調査報告で、語学の授業内で宗教について言及または議論することに関し、教師がいかなる認識を持つかを確認する目的で行われた。まず、調査対象者が現在教育している国や地域についてデータを収集した。次に、授業中に宗教に関する話題が出る頻度について、回答を求めた。最後に、授業中に宗教に関する話題が出ることに、どのように感じるかを質問した。このデータは、調査対象者の回答した宗教的信念に基づきクロス分析されている。多項選択式の質問により意見を選択する量的データの収集に加え、与えられた回答にとらわれない新たなテーマや思考パターンを検討するために、記述式の回答により回答の幅を広げることも試みた。

Interest in the relationship between religion and language teaching/learning is growing among researchers (Wong, Kristjansson, & Dörnyei, 2013); however, research aimed at gauging EFL/ESL teachers' receptiveness to religion being raised in lessons seems to be lacking. Some researchers have their own views: Johnston (2003), Varghese and Johnston (2007), and Wicking (2012) argue that a teacher's moral and religious beliefs will invariably affect their teaching and interactions with learners, while Purgason (2009) holds that language instructors "do not have to shy away ... from letting religion or any other controversial topic come up in the classroom" provided that the subject is not raised in a way that offends or asserts power over learners (p. 191). Liyanage, Bartlett, and Grimbeek (2010) go further, supporting the view that learners' ethno-religious backgrounds may be a factor in instructional design.

Other EFL/ESL practitioners, however, feel that religion is to be kept out of the classroom. Edge (2003) and Pennycook and Makoni (2005) raise concerns about teachers of faith evangelizing unsuspecting students. Wicking (2012), citing some comments posted on an online discussion forum, expressed concern that a no-religion policy appears to be put in place by many teachers.

None of these contributions to the literature, however, contain research on what teachers in the field think about religion being raised in class. The rationale behind this study, therefore, was to shed some light on EFL/ESL teachers' thoughts on this issue—to see if the "no religion in class" comments mentioned by Wicking (2012) represent a common belief or that of a vocal minority.

Research questions

This study explored the following research questions:

1. What are the opinions of EFL/ESL teachers based in Japan and elsewhere on religion as a discussion topic or as a topic of mention in ELT settings?
2. Are there significant differences of opinion on this issue between teachers with religious/spiritual beliefs, agnostic teachers, and atheist teachers?

The respondents

A total of 277 EFL/ESL teachers, teacher-trainers, and materials developers participated in the survey: 46% are based in Japan and the rest are spread out in 43 other countries. Nearly all of the respondents (99%) teach or have taught in primary or secondary schools, and 71% teach or have taught at the university level. Nearly 60% have past or current experience in private language schools, and 14% operate or have operated their own schools.

Regarding religious belief, 42% of respondents identified themselves as Christians (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, or nondenominational). Atheists (22%) and agnostics (10%) comprised the next-largest groups, while 7% reported a belief in a divine power without practicing a formal religion. Religious beliefs such as Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, and Sikhism combined for the remaining 19% of respondents (see Table 1).

Table 1. Respondents' religious beliefs

Religious belief	% of respondents
Christian	42%
Atheist	22%
Agnostic	10%
Believe in God, no formal religion	7%
Muslim	5%
Buddhist	2%
Jewish	1%
Hindu	1%
Sikh	1%
Other	9%

Methodology

Respondents were asked three multiple-choice questions regarding their views on religion being discussed/mentioned in ELT settings. In addition, each question contained a written-comment option. A six-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" was used; a "neutral" answer-choice option was not offered so as to encourage respondents to deeply consider their opinions, and to prompt as many respondents as possible to leave written comments.

The multiple-choice answers were tabulated for respondents overall, according to their religious beliefs or lack thereof, and according to the countries/regions where they teach. The qualitative data contained in written comments were quantified after being examined for frequently appearing opinions or patterns of thought.

Results

The data gathered in this study suggest that EFL/ESL teachers are generally not opposed to religion being mentioned or discussed in class, provided that it is done in certain ways and under certain conditions. Respondents' answers to the study's three main questions are as follows:

Question 1: To what extent do you agree with the statement, "Religion should be totally avoided in English lessons?"

Of the survey's 277 participants, 272 selected one of the six answer choices (ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree"), and 93 left written comments.

Multiple-choice answers

As shown in Figure 1, nearly 60% of the respondents disagreed at least somewhat with the idea that religion should be totally avoided as a class topic. Overall, only 9% strongly felt that religion should be totally avoided: 15% of atheists and 15% of agnostics held this view, compared to 5% of believers.

Nearly half of atheists (49%) and more than half of agnostics (54%) disagreed to at least some degree with the idea of entirely avoiding religion in class—compared with 61% of believers (see Figure 2). In other words, atheists and agnostics were more likely than believers to want religion avoided in class, but not overwhelmingly so.

Teachers based in the Middle East were nearly

50% more likely than respondents in general to feel, at least to some extent, that religion should be avoided in class. The findings for other countries/regions were not significantly different than those for respondents overall.

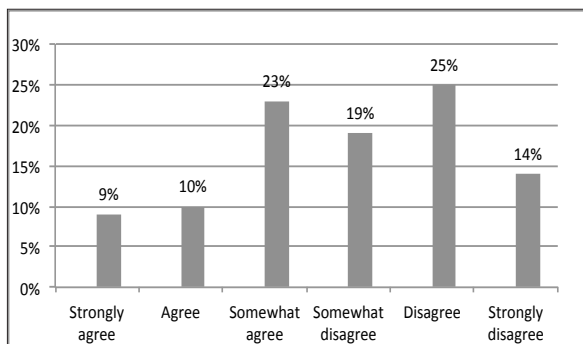


Figure 1. Responses to "Religion should be totally avoided in English lessons." (respondents overall; n=272)

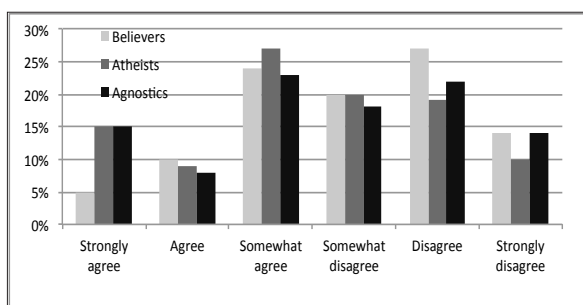


Figure 2. Responses to "Religion should be totally avoided in English lessons." (believers, atheists, and agnostics)

Written responses

The most common sentiment expressed in written comments (see Table 2) was that mentioning or discussing religion in the ELT classroom is acceptable if done relative to cultural understanding or in another neutral way. For example:

"Religion (and lack thereof) is part of one's culture, and should be respected. We can't respect what we do not discuss and consider." (Agnostic, U.S.)

"Cultural holidays and customs often have religious origins, so if you want someone to explain a part of their culture but bar others from explaining theirs, it is discrimination.

Thus, it is acceptable to discuss religious content in a neutral way in public school contexts." (Protestant, Japan)

"Religion and culture go hand-in-hand. The issue isn't whether or not you discuss religion; it's how you go about it." (Protestant, Japan)

"It's a huge part of the cultures of English-speaking countries. It's shaped our culture, our language, and science, and remains a vital issue in today's societies. Avoiding it altogether on purpose is a terrible idea." (Agnostic, Japan)

Other respondents noted that religion need not be avoided provided that it is raised by learners, not by teachers:

"The key is that the topic of religion (like many topics) should be brought up by the students, not forced upon the students." (Protestant, Japan)

"If my students want to talk about religion, then we do." (Catholic, Japan)

"I don't build it into my lessons, but a good teacher allows students the freedom to 'run' with a lesson in the direction of their choice." (Agnostic, Hong Kong)

"Topics discussed should reflect what students want to talk about, not what the teacher wants to impose." (Religious belief not specified, Poland)

Another frequently expressed view was that mentioning religion in class is fine as long as proselytizing is avoided. For example:

"I think it's fine to use it as a subject for discussion or for study texts. I would hate to see English lessons being used as a vehicle for proselytization, though, especially for children. I know there are American fundamentalist churches with branches in Japan offering English lessons as a way to lure unsuspecting Japanese students into their cults—it's sad, scary, and true." (Buddhist, Japan)

"There is nothing wrong with discussing religion. Don't preach, however, and don't try to convert." (Catholic, Japan)

"Using an EFL classroom for proselytizing is simply unethical. However, if you work at a

religious institution or if the student wants to learn ‘Biblical English’ (i.e., English for Specific Purposes) then it would be a natural topic.” (Atheist, South Korea)

Table 2. Written responses’ emerging themes: “Religion should be totally avoided in English lessons.”

Emerging theme	Number of occurrences
OK to discuss religion regarding cultural understanding or other neutral way	27
Religion is OK if raised by learners	22
OK to discuss religion if proselytizing is avoided	20
Religion is part of daily life, so it’s OK to mention/discuss	19
Religion is inappropriate in EFL/ESL classes	9
Religion is OK to spark discussion/conversation	5
Depends on students, class demographic, or school policy	2
OK as long as students/teachers are sensitive to various religions	2
OK to speak openly about God/religion	1
OK if learners are old enough	1
Anti-religious comment	1
<i>(93 written comments; some comments expressed more than one theme)</i>	
Total	109

Question 2: To what extent do you agree with the statement, “It’s okay to discuss religion in an English class, but only in a neutral way (e.g., if discussing it as a cultural aspect of a given country or countries)?”

Of the survey’s 277 participants, 271 selected one of the six answer choices (ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”), and 61 left written comments.

Multiple-choice answers

Most respondents (85%) agreed at least somewhat that discussing religion in class is acceptable as a

cultural aspect or in another neutral way. Agnostics (89%), believers (86%), and atheists (78%) were not significantly different in their responses from the overall 85% result (see Figure 3).

One-third of atheists (compared to 19% of believers and 14% of agnostics) answered “strongly agree” that discussion of religion in a neutral way was okay in class. Atheists were also significantly more likely to disagree with the idea to some degree (22%) than were believers (14%) and agnostics (11%) (see Figure 4).

There were no significant differences of opinion among teachers in different countries or parts of the world.

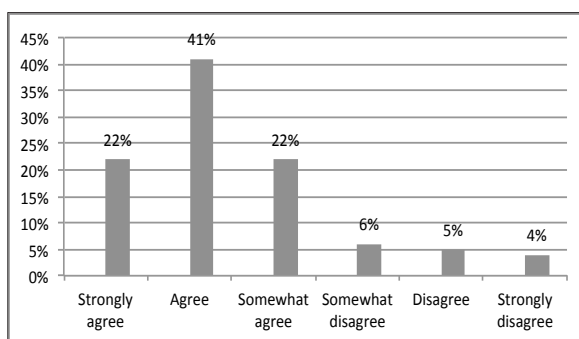


Figure 3. Responses to “It’s okay to discuss religion in an English class, but only in a neutral way.” (respondents overall; n=271)

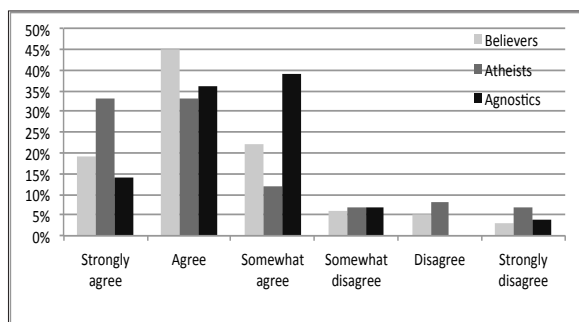


Figure 4. Responses to “It’s okay to discuss religion in an English class, but only in a neutral way.” (believers, atheists, and agnostics)

Written responses

The most common view expressed in written comments (see Table 3) was that the raising of religion in a cultural or societal context is acceptable in ELT classes. For example:

“English-speaking countries are religiously diverse both in particular religion and level

of practice. It would be hard to understand America without explaining these things, and many students (especially Japanese) come with the preconception that 'America is a Christian nation.' The only way to handle this is to talk about it. Silence leaves ignorance in place." (Protestant, Japan)

"So the children will be aware that in every country there is a religion and people have a style of praying and action." (Catholic, Japan)

"With older students and adults, discussions about wider political issues connected to religion can make for engaging topics." (Atheist, Turkey)

"For young children religious themes (Christmas, Easter, etc.) can be taught as cultural trends and even celebrated in an attempt to learn about that culture. In older/adult settings religion can be discussed objectively. And it's often used as reasoning for individuals' opinions on abortion, gay marriage, etc." (Atheist, South Korea)

The second most common view was that mentioning/discussing religion in ELT settings is fine, so long as proselytization is avoided:

"The English class not the place to convert people. But it's appropriate to let your students know what your belief system is." (Protestant, Japan)

"It's okay to discuss religion, full stop. On the other hand, religion should be avoided if the teacher is not confident of being open-minded and supporting any views that appear. Teachers should avoid proselytizing." (Believer with no formal religion, Japan)

"It should be discussed neutrally in terms of history or doctrine. There should never be proselytizing." (Atheist, Japan)

"It's okay to discuss one's own experiences, as long as the teacher and students avoid salesmanship of religion, and as long as this doesn't become common enough to constitute an agenda on the part of the teacher or student." (Agnostic, Japan)

The third-most commonly expressed view was that religion was an acceptable ELT topic provided that it is raised by learners, not teachers:

"Only if it comes up in discussion and is not part of the teacher's lesson plan." (Atheist, Japan)

"One's personal views on the afterlife should not be discussed except at the instigation of the student." (Atheist, Japan)

"I don't think teachers have a right to begin a discussion with religion in mind and to push their views onto their students, but they can allow students to discuss it if that is what they want to do." (Agnostic, Hong Kong)

"If one of my students brings up religion in class, asks a question, then the question is answered." (Catholic, Japan)

Table 3. Written responses' emerging themes: "It's okay to discuss religion in an English class, but only in a neutral way."

Emerging theme	Number of occurrences
OK if religion isn't pushed; avoid proselytizing	15
OK if raised by students	14
Religion is inappropriate in language classes	8
OK to discuss God/religion openly	6
Social/moral issue context	5
Depends if educational setting is religious	3
OK to raise, but class should stay on course goals	2
Anti-religious comment	2
Concern about stereotypes	1
<i>(61 written comments; some expressed more than one theme)</i>	
Total	73

Question 3: To what extent do you agree with the statement, "It's okay to include religious themes or references while teaching a lesson point (e.g., while practicing past tense, saying 'I went to church last Sunday')?"

Of the survey's 277 participants, 274 selected one of the six answer choices (ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree"), and 66 left written comments.

Multiple-choice answers

More than 70% of the respondents felt at least somewhat that including religion-themed vocabulary or references within a larger teaching point was acceptable (see Figure 5). Agnostics (86%) and believers (80%) expressed at least some approval at rates higher than the overall 70% rate (see Figure 6).

Atheists (62%) were the most likely group to at least somewhat disapprove of the use of religious themes or vocabulary when teaching or practicing language features. They also answered “strongly disagree” to this question more than three times as often as respondents overall and nearly six times as often as believers.

Teachers based in the U.S. or Canada were 72% more likely than respondents overall to oppose the embedding of religious references within teaching points. In contrast, United Kingdom-based teachers were 23% more likely than respondents overall to support it.

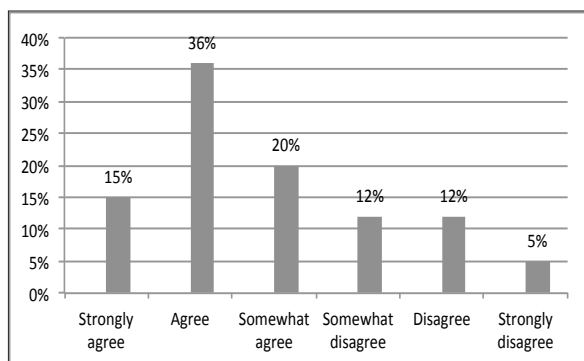


Figure 5. Responses to “It’s okay to include religious themes or references while teaching a lesson point.” (respondents overall; n=274)

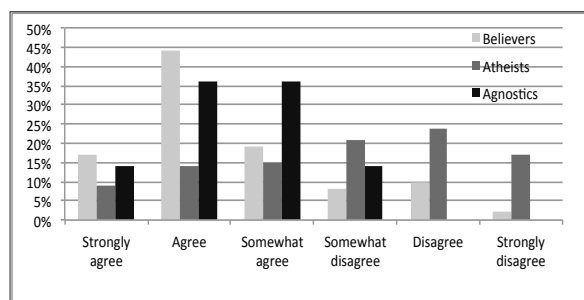


Figure 6. Responses to “It’s okay to include religious themes or references while teaching a lesson point.” (believers, atheists, and agnostics)

Written responses

While the multiple-choice responses were favorable toward including religious themes/ references within teaching points, the respondents’ written comments generally called for strict conditions being placed on the practice.

The most commonly expressed opinion (see Table 4) was that the use of religious vocabulary/ references is acceptable only if it serves students’ learning needs. For instance:

“Religion shouldn’t be included in your lesson plan. But for students who are religious then they will have to learn how to express this in English and so it would be necessary to include this during the lesson.” (Atheist, Japan)

“It depends on the context and whether or not learning such language will be useful and relevant to the students. If they’re going to visit a Christian country, it seems to be practical.” (Believer with no formal religion, Japan)

“If I’m teaching a class with students from many different countries, I might teach them the various ways they can describe their religious activity in English: ‘I went to the temple last Sunday,’ ‘I went to the mosque last Sunday,’ ‘I went to church last Sunday,’ etc. However, I teach in a secular Japanese environment, so it would not be a useful sentence for most students.” (Protestant, Japan)

“If it fits into the context of the lesson, why not?” (Believer with no formal religion, Turkey)

The second most common view was that including religious references is acceptable when describing the teacher’s or learners’ daily lives:

“If someone (the teacher?) is relating the events of her weekend and includes this then it’s OK, but it seems unnecessary otherwise.” (Atheist, Japan)

“Religious observances are part of some people’s everyday lives. Being able to express one’s lifestyle is a valuable part of any English program.” (Atheist, Japan)

“If that’s what I do on Sunday, what does it matter? I know some of my colleagues would say, ‘I went drinking on Saturday.’” (Protestant, South Korea)

“No difference between using ‘I went to church’ and ‘I went to the movies.’” (Atheist, South Korea)

Other respondents approved of use of religious themes/references provided that proselytizing is avoided, or that they are brought into play by learners and not teachers. Slightly fewer than 10% of written comments expressed the view that including religious vocabulary/themes is never appropriate.

Table 4. Written responses' emerging themes: “It’s okay to include religious themes or references while teaching a lesson point (e.g., while practicing past tense, saying ‘I went to church last Sunday’).”

Emerging theme	Number of occurrences
OK if relevant to lesson/ contains useful language/ serves learning needs	18
OK if used to describe daily life	13
OK as long as proselytizing is avoided/ views or beliefs aren't pushed	9
OK if religion is raised by learners	7
Not appropriate to include religious references	6
OK if explaining cultural aspects (holidays, etc.)	4
OK as long as one religion isn't favored	4
Not necessary at all to avoid religion	4
OK as long as religious vocabulary is used proportionate to other vocabulary	3
OK if learners are of the same religion	2
Anti-religious comment	1
<i>(66 written comments; some expressed more than one theme)</i>	
Total	71

Conclusions

The following conclusions were drawn regarding the research questions:

1) What are the opinions of EFL/ESL teachers based in Japan and elsewhere on religion as a discussion topic or topic of mention in ELT settings?

The survey's findings do not support the hypothesis by Wicking (2012) that there may be a strict “no religion” policy put in place by a high number of EFL/ESL teachers. The survey's respondents generally did not oppose religion being mentioned or discussed in class, provided that it pertained to culture or societal issues; that it was raised by learners and not by teachers; that it was raised relative to teachers' or learners' daily lives; and/or that proselytizing was strictly avoided.

2) Are there significant differences of opinion between teachers with religious/spiritual beliefs, agnostic teachers, and atheist teachers?

Atheist and agnostic teachers did not support the idea of “checking religion at the door,” at least not *en masse*. While atheists were a bit more likely than believers and agnostics to favor avoiding religion in the ELT classroom, they were still at least somewhat agreeable to religion being raised—again, provided that certain conditions are met, as mentioned above.

The survey's 277 respondents (22% of whom were atheists) had every opportunity to make hostile comments about religion in the survey's written responses, but only two did so—providing further evidence that hostility toward religion in the ELT field, about which Wicking (2012) expressed concern, is not a common sentiment among teachers.

The only significant difference of opinion between atheists, agnostics, and believers regarded the embedding of religious references within the teaching of specific language features—a practice that atheist teachers were far more likely to oppose than believers.

Pedagogical implications

The results of this survey suggest that ELT instructors (whether they believe in the divine or not) generally hold the same view as Purgason (2009)—there is no need to shy away from religion as a language classroom topic, provided

that the subject is handled appropriately.

The survey's respondents generally acknowledge religion's role as an important part of many people's lives and as a key characteristic of nations and cultures—as such, it need not be excluded from the ELT classroom any more than any other topic in life. The respondents in general also acknowledged that discussing or mentioning religion is not the same thing as trying to “sell” it—and that the former is acceptable provided that the latter is avoided.

Possibilities for future research

The study described here involved a small sample of EFL/ESL teachers. Further research involving a greater number of teachers would provide a better view of the language teaching community's perspective on religion being raised in class.

In addition, although this study's participants are based in 44 countries, nearly half of them are based in Japan; a more balanced respondent sample in terms of countries represented would be ideal. This study suggests that where a teacher is based likely has little bearing on their views regarding religion in class, but a wider geographical sample could shed more light on that question.

This study did not differentiate between native-speaker teachers of English and non-native-speaker teachers. Investigating whether opinions on religion in class differ significantly between the two groups could be a revealing research effort. Given Western ideas of “political correctness,” for instance, it might be hypothesized that native-speaker teachers are more likely than non-native speakers to frown on religion as a class topic. There is no evidence of this in the study described here, but then again, that question was not specifically addressed.

Another research possibility involves learners' views on the mentioning or discussion of religion in their language lessons. Ultimately, the best English lessons are centered on students' needs—learners' feedback on what happens in the ELT classroom, including their views on the appropriateness of topics such as religion, is vital to making student-centered learning a reality.

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