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Dealing with Social Issues: Helping teachers overcome emotional barriers

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Current social issues are increasingly being raised as topics for conversation in EFL classes in Japan, both in course books and by the students and teachers themselves. Whether or not these issues are raised often depends on the teacher. Many teachers are not comfortable dealing with social issues such as sexual/gender issues, religious, or political issues. The emotional barriers a teacher feels can lead to avoidance of discussion of issues that directly impact our students' lives. This article outlines some of the barriers which teachers experience, and gives some ideas how teachers can overcome them.

最近の社会の問題が英語の授業で少しずつ話題になっています。しかし、この話題を授業で扱うかどうかは先生によって決まります。性の問題、ジェンダー、宗教、政治などの問題を扱うことにある先生達は不安を持っています。それらの問題は直接私たちの生徒の人生にかかわってくるものです。先生の不安が消えない内はこれらの重要な問題を避けてしまいます。不安を持っている先生達を取り囲んでいるバリア、先生達がそれらのバリアをどうやって乗り越えるかいくつかのアイデアをくれます。

Current social issues are increasingly being raised as topics for conversation in EFL classes in Japan, both in course books and by the students and teachers themselves. Kip Cates wrote:

Omitting important but controversial issues from our language teaching 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 them that language study is irrelevant to the world and the controversial problems facing it. (Cates, 1997)

How do teachers feel about approaching sensitive topics with their students? This article outlines some of the barriers which teachers experience, based on a study on teacher attitudes and controversial issues conducted at JALT '99 (Haynes, 2001). The article then gives some ideas how teachers can overcome their own affective barriers to teaching these topics. Although I will focus on one particular issue, HIV/AIDS, many feelings a teacher experiences related to this subject also arise with other issues. Domestic violence, child abuse, bullying, environmental destruction, drug abuse, abortion, political scandals involving greed among other subjects can bring up a range of emotions in the teacher, and this can lead to avoidance of discussion of issues that directly impact our students' lives.

Reluctance

Controversial issues are subjects or problems “about which there are significant differences of opinion, for which there are no easy resolutions, and discussion of which generally create strong feelings among people” (Colorado Springs School District, 1995). Some teachers are reluctant to address any sort of controversial issues in class because they are concerned about presenting issues fairly and objectively, or about offending someone, or because they fear objections by students or administration. Although these concerns are legitimate, we should be careful that our own discomfort is not an obstacle to serving our students' language needs and interests. There are a number of limits teachers expressed in the study that can be resolved quite easily. I would like to address these in the following sections.

“My students' levels are too low.”

It is true that students require sufficient vocabulary, structures and conversational strategies, to be able to handle a topic. The teacher can provide them with the linguistic tools they need. With this support, students at just about any level can hold conversations on just about any topic. In fact, teachers have reported that their students actually feel more comfortable talking about certain issues in English than in Japanese.

“My students aren’t interested in that topic.”

Many teachers feel that certain topics would not work in the EFL classroom and shy away from them unnecessarily. For example, many Japanese college-level students are interested in studying the topic of HIV/AIDS (Miller, 1996; Valentine-Dunkley, 1997; Welker & Houston, 1999), a fact which may surprise many EFL teachers in Japan. In one study of 388 respondents at four universities in Aichi Prefecture, 96.4% either agreed or somewhat agreed that the topic of AIDS should be included in the university curriculum (Phillips et al, 1998). Perhaps we need to ask our students if they *are* interested in a given topic, rather than assume they are not.

“I don’t hear my students talking about social issues.”

Or, for example, “Well, AIDS isn’t a problem here because I haven’t seen it in the press.” Teachers may not be aware of students’ interests due to our own limited knowledge of Japanese, or that we simply are not around our students when they *do* talk about these issues. We may also be assuming that the lack of discussion on the part of students who also may have seen little regarding the topic in the media can be interpreted as lack of interest in the topic. Again, checking with students is the best way to verify our assumptions.

“It’s not relevant to my students’ lives.”

If you are interested in raising a topic, but are not sure the students will find it relevant to their own experience, do some research. Find out about the issue from local sources and bring this information into class for discussion. Using AIDS as an example, making students aware of the problem globally and locally piques their interest. According to World Health Organization research, internationally 16,000 new infections occur daily (W.H.O. Report, 1998), out of which 7,000 are young people aged 15-24, one every five minutes (W.H.O. Report, 1998; Chabon & Futterman, 1999). Few people may know that here in Japan, HIV infection rates continue to increase, especially among young people. An alarming trend is what the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry reports as an increasing number of AIDS cases among people that have never been included in previous HIV figures. This means that these people may have been infected for ten years or more without ever knowing their HIV status. By presenting these figures, and discussing the ramifications in terms of discrimination, or rising health care costs, students begin to see how the topic will affect them personally. Teachers can then go into details about the disease and how students can protect themselves and those they care about.

Implementation

To sum up this section, there are a number of things you can do to easily introduce various social issues in your classes:

- Ask your students if they would like to talk about various issues. Through questionnaires and small group discussions you can learn where your students' interests lie. You might be surprised at the variety of social topics they come up with.
- Be prepared. The more you know about the topic, the more confident you will be in creating class materials, and in fielding questions from students.
- Adapt materials to your students' levels and give them the vocabulary / structural support they need to have a basic conversation on a particular topic.
- Utilize Internet for ready-made materials:
HIV/AIDS: <http://www.japanetwork.gol.com>
Violence and Abuse: <http://www.mincava.umn.edu/>
Theme Based Pages: <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~leslieob/themes.html>
Gay and Lesbian Issues: <http://www.glsen.org/templates/resources/index.html>
- Use articles you can find. If you can't find them, state this and ask your students why it seems so difficult to find information about the topic in Japan. They might come up with sources for you.

- See how the issue relates to your students' community. Take advantage of events such as World AIDS Day, UNICEF Day, etc. to raise awareness.
- Be fair. Use the information you learn to present the topic from a variety of viewpoints which your students can use as a basis for discussion.
- Create a safe atmosphere for your students. Support them in expressing their viewpoints and encourage alternative opinions.

Take the Risk

Raising controversial issues in the EFL classroom can be done successfully, but the teacher needs to feel at ease doing so.

- Address your own comfort zone. For example, one teacher had students answer written true-false questions related to sexual information and avoided discussing the answers with them in order to maintain an acceptable level of personal comfort.
- Try Comfort Zone +1. When you do approach an issue that is sensitive for you, push your "comfort envelope" just a bit. You may find that your students can handle much more than you give them credit for, and you as a teacher will grow as a result.

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