Imparting criticality and raising consciousness: Aiming to do more than simply 'teach English'

批判力の付与と意識の向上:単に「英語を教える」を超える

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ABSTRACT

We see the goal of this article as preparing Japanese university learners and fellow Second Language Acquisition (SLA) professionals for uncertain and challenging times ahead. We are facing many local, regional and global social and environmental issues which we feel must be addressed. From global warming and the ubiquitous use of plastic to gender and income inequality and disparity, there are a multitude of concerns which face us all. Our daily English lessons should strive to inspire an increased awareness and empower change regarding these issues. This should be done in an environment which encourages key English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) ideals. Finally, this paper will provide two 100-minute university-level lesson plans for teachers to experiment with. We hope readers find the ideas presented here inspirational and that they provide food for thought for the future development of your own teaching methodology and theory of practice.

KEYWORDS: Social and environmental issues, Theory of practice, ELF, Culturally reponsive pedagogy

1. INTRODUCTION

We see climate change and social issues such as gender inequality and the vast income disparity generated by latter-day capitalism as the fundamental problems of our epoch. We do not feel it is adequate to simply 'teach English', as the precarious time in which we live and our ardent political and philosophical values demand we approach the acquisition of English through a more progressive and critically aware paradigm. Teaching in Tamagawa University and other institutions, we are required to use a variety of different textbooks and teaching materials. Through many years imparting this content to Japanese university learners we often have the distinct feeling that we are merely describing certain disparate

topics or even compounding neoliberal ideals, such as the imperative for constant economic growth and profit, which we feel actually aggravates many environmental and social issues. For example, the TOEIC textbook we use has units entitled 'Purchasing' and 'Finance', which provide a simplistic and unquestioning view of these concepts, usually from an America-centric worldview. We feel the authenticity of this material does not meet certain ELF criteria or represents the values we hold as educators. While there is no space in this article to provide a more comprehensive critique of the teaching materials commonly used in Japanese university classrooms, we would anticipate, and certainly hope, that many SLA practitioners reading this paper have experienced a similar feeling of alienation from the material we are expected to use.

In this paper we seek to raise awareness of how to apply a more critical perspective in the university classroom and raise the consciousness of our learners to hopefully give them a more solid footing in their ascent to become active democratic citizens. According to Suzuki (2016), becoming an active democratic citizen means that as individuals, we can appropriate our own history and the achievements of society and pass them to new generations. This process of humanization views an educators' work as providing a platform which allows learners to shape a new future. We feel strongly that teachers have an important role to play in this process, as education is a key driving force in developing human potential.

As educators it is essential to continue to develop our own theory of practice, to be responsive to the uniqueness of the educational context in which we work and the broader socio-political conditions that we and our learners are a part of. As Kumaravadivelu (2001) neatly explains, this 'competence and confidence can evolve only if teachers have the desire and the determination to acquire and assert a fair degree of autonomy in pedagogic decision making' (p. 548). This does not mean throwing the baby out with the bathwater and rejecting standard texts used throughout the tertiary education sector in Japan, but having the confidence to add to and shape these texts and bring in your own ever-evolving personalized lesson ideas and content. In the second half of this article we will suggest some concrete examples of this. These lesson ideas have a harmony with our own ontological and epistemological underpinnings and, while you perhaps may not concur with ours, we do implore you to explore your own values and bring them to the fore in your classroom practice. We have chosen to write this article together as we share similar philosophical beliefs and we have also drawn inspiration from a great many other theorists. We agree with McLaren and Farahmandpur when they state that, 'immovably entrenched social, political, and economic disparities and antagonisms compel us as educators and cultural workers to create alternatives to the logic of capitalist accumulation' (2001, p. 137). As such, we feel that the political does not simply reside in the Diet building in Kasumigazeki or is merely an option to be exercised on voting day. It is fundamentally important for teachers to bring the local, regional and global concerns presented in this paper to the everyday lives of our learners in the university classroom.

This paper will explain some crucial environmental and social problems and how they impact Japan on a regional level and the whole planet on a global level. The literature review will seek to ground our ideas in this context in a bid to stress how important it is to approach these issues in the classroom. Next, certain ELF criteria will be emphasised

as to clearly explain how we feel it is not only important to teach these environmental and social issues, but to do so in a way which is sensitive to ELF concerns and our own teaching philosophy. Finally, two lessons plans will be explained in detail to demonstrate how this theory works in practice, before concluding with some additional ideas and hopes for the future.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Some inspiration for this paper are social issues, in Japan and on a global level, such as widening income inequality, poverty, healthcare, employment discrimination, gender disparity, work life balance etc. and environmental issues such as deforestation, plastic use, the limits of recycling, desertification etc. While we would certainly hope that global warming is now viewed as an undeniable fact, it is still important to declare that, 'climate change is one of the major international problems in the 21st century, which goes beyond the scope of a scientific problem and represents a complex interdisciplinary problem that covers environmental, economic, and social aspects' (Mokhov, 2022, p. 7). We believe it is important to bring these social and environmental issues to the classroom. As global warming, for example, has the potential to threaten the very future of humanity and being aware and taking action against it is absolutely crucial (Bouba & HongXia, 2022). We also feel, as educators, we must embrace that we have a wider responsibility to develop a more culturally responsive pedagogy in which it is important to encourage the confrontation of social injustices and challenge issues of power (Young, 2010). While we acknowledge, to some degree, we are fortunate to teach in a developed country with a relatively well-developed middleclass and our learners perhaps do not face the same economic or social, for example, racial hardships as other countries or less advantaged educational settings. We do, however, certainly feel the ideas presented in this paper have similar ambitions and emerge from an equatable source of inequality and injustice.

In the second half of the article we will outline two specific 100 minute lessons plans which will aim to boost our learners' awareness and criticality of a wide variety of different social issues. These include prominent economic concerns relevant to the lives of our learners, as the research of Ohtake (2008) makes clear, 'income inequality in Japan has increased during the last two decades' and one of the main factors contributing to this 'was the declining income share for the bottom 25% of income classes' (p. 105). Based on comprehensive analysis from Okoshi et al. (2014), social issues such as a distinct gender divide is also clearly apparent in Japan. Their findings identify a disproportionately low ratio of female to male full professors in different medical fields, universities and hospitals and importantly they stipulate that 'bringing change to this inequality will require persistent effort, continuous monitoring of progress and a commitment to diversifying faculty and leadership' (p. 226). This is one of the key motivating factors in writing this paper and trying to encourage a socially aware group of learners in our classrooms. We teach a variety of different levels and learners with a huge range of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to attend university and learn English. We also work at an all woman's university, Kyoritsu University, and soon the students in our classrooms will grow up to become the leaders of tomorrow. We want them to be aware of these issues and force the change that is required

to make Japan a fair and equal place for all. We do not feel it is an overgeneralization to say that Japanese woman, 'are encouraged to fulfil traditional gender roles from their school days onward by having children after getting married and by quitting work after having said children'(Belarmino & Roberts, 2019, p. 284). As such, we want our lessons to invigorate and catalyse our learners to reach their unfettered potential and deconstruct and challenge accepted social norms rather than compounding them.

It is also essential that environmental issues should play a prominent role in our classes and not only focus on the immediate locality of Tokyo or Japan, but the global challenges we all face. As one of us lived and taught at a university in Brazil, we feel these issues can not only broaden our students'minds about environmental issues, but also teach cultural and geographic content, too. It is said that Brazil's Amazon rainforest produces around 20% of the oxygen in the Earth's atmosphere (Bouba & HongXia, 2022) and according to data analysed by Silva Junior et al. (2020), the rate of deforestation increased 47% when compared to 2018 and is the highest rate in the decade. This also bleeds into social issues as well as the, until very recently ousted, populist Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro declared these numbers a lie. His Trumpian assault on facts stirred a great sense of resentment and anger from the scientific community, which felt under significant threat from his administration (Herton, 2019). Our learners are already of voting age and while these issues are complex and nuanced and it may be difficult for lower-level students to fully grasp them in their L2, some attempt at raising awareness of political bias and outright propaganda should, at least occasionally, be attempted.

For us it is also very important that the above environmental and social concerns and the below lesson ideas are taught and encouraged in a credible ELF setting. We understand English as a Lingua Franca to mean an authentic form of intelligible English which crosses cultural and geographical boundaries (House, 1999). Where native speaker models are not necessarily the goal or the measurement of success (Jenkins, 2006) and the key point is how the language enhances a learner's professional and social opportunities. Academic rigour is essential in this process and the more learners are empowered to develop an increased autonomy and confidence and do not fear the making of mistakes, they will take additional ownership of the language. We feel very passionate, especially as one of us is a non-native English speaker, that a language should be a vehicle for change and empowerment. Accommodation skills and mutual negotiation are vital (Jenkins, 2009) and this includes between both student-teacher and student-student interaction. An authentic ELF version of English should aim to help facilitate cross-cultural communication and allow learners to reach their goals in life, increase personal development and affect social empowerment and change. This is particularly interesting as one of us is of Brazilian and Japanese lineage, our learners are almost all Japanese and as Jenkins explains, ELF 'is above all an expanding circle phenomenon' (2017, p. 2). Our lesson ideas described below will provide some concrete examples for you to experiment with in the classroom. For us it is important that they are compatible with many key features of the ELF core philosophy, especially as one of us is a genuine ELF practitioner, while the other just espouses the worldview.

3. METHODOLOGY

In the next section we will give two examples of lessons that have worked for us during a 100-minute Japanese university English class. These are the six general stages in the teaching of these lessons: (1) Warm up questions with three student examples, (2) Introduction of the task, (3) Production (pre-task) phase, (4) Performance, (5) Examples and feedback, and (6) Potential post task assignment. We feel these stages are quite logical and self-explanatory, however, they are also quite flexible and can be amended or even subtracted depending on one's teaching style and the time you wish to spend on the lesson. We would say, if you do not have a full class to spend on these following lesson plans, then stages (1), (5) and (6) could be omitted for increased parsimony. We will not explain these six stages in full detail, as their relevance should be apparent from the description below and their context in the explanation. Also, the focus of this article is on the content, rather than the method. However, if you are interested, we would strongly recommend you read section three of a previous article in this journal which focuses explicitly on the methodology (Marsh, 2022).

4. PROCEDURE

4.1 Raising awareness of environmental or social problems, what impact they cause and what potential solutions there may be.

     1. Warm up questions with three student examples: What is the biggest problem in your life, in Japan and in the world? Why do you think so and what are some real-life examples? This stage encourages learners to think of micro and macro level concerns and how they connect to their day-to-day life.

     2. Introduction of the task: Brainstorm environmental or social problems on the board. Collect one or two examples as a class and then let the students work together and research online for a few minutes. Then, elicit ten or more problems from the class. Some example environmental problems include: plastic waste, water pollution (sea and fresh water), deforestation, light pollution, noise pollution, desertification, acid rain, PM2.5, and food waste etc. Basically, this lesson plan can be used twice for environmental or social problems respectively. We would not recommend conflating the two sets of problems in the same class as, while many of the issues overlap, we feel it is important to establish a distinction between the two.

     3. Production (pre-task) phase: Have each student choose a problem and encourage they select a topic they do not know much about to promote a variety of different, diverse issues. Give the class 20-30 minutes to research and write five or more reasons or examples of why this is a problem and three potential ways it could be improved. Encourage the class to find concrete examples from Tokyo, Japan or specific areas of the world. They will often give quite generalized examples if you do not make this clear. You could also request they show their sources or internet references if you have a higher level or more motivated class. A suitable example could concern the limitations of recycling. It is easy enough to find some basic percentages through a google search to illustrate, for example, the global total of all recycled plastic is very low and that most plastic recycling in Japan

is actually 'thermal recycling', basically meaning it is classed as recycling, but really just burnt to generate electricity. We will not be specific here or show the references as this information is easy enough to find online and we encourage teachers to select issues which are personal to your individual worldview.

4. Performance: Once the class has adequate time to find some interesting information and potential solutions or ways to improve the problem, they are ready to share their ideas with each other. It would seem most beneficial to randomly mix the class into groups of four or five so they will be working with people they do not usually sit with. Provide a structure on the board so the class can have a shared reference for how to discuss their research and how to close and request questions from their group. For example: Hello everyone, the environment problem I chose was… Some interesting information I found… Here are some ways to help improve this problem in the future… Thank you for listening, please ask me some questions. It is important to emphasize accessible questions and for the students to feel free to give their ideas. After all, this is the fluency stage of the lesson and the ultimate goal of our class is building confidence and competence in English, not being overly strict about scientific or sociological matters.

5. Examples and feedback: If time permits, encourage a volunteer from each group give their example to the whole class. Again, questions are important to show engagement and encourage negotiation of meaning and accommodation skills. This is also a good opportunity to encourage learner confidence and give feedback regarding delivery skills such as eye contact and volume, pronunciation, etc.

6. Potential post task assignment: We believe the social or environmental issues raised in this class would provide an excellent springboard for a homework writing task or even generate the inspiration for a speaking assessment presentation or potentially a more in-depth process writing assignment. Through our experience this lesson will often spark an intrinsic desire to learn more and become passionate about a topic. This can be further kindled by the teacher by adding extra support and input during stages two, three, five or six. We feel the learning opportunities provided in this lesson are plentiful and emerge from the learners themselves. This style of lesson can encourage learning opportunities which are student-centered and give teachers the confidence to move away from a solely textbook based teaching point driven style (Allwright, 2005).

4.2 Choose a corporation, research good and bad points and if it would be a suitable place for you to work in the future.

1. Warm up questions with three student examples: Do you have a part-time job? What job do you want in the future? What do you think may be the best and worst thing about this job?

2. Introduction of the task: Brainstorm companies on the board and try to be as realistic regarding future employment as possible. It is also acceptable to include universities, educational institutions and government departments. Try to emphasize that while they may not know where their future professional career may yet take them, it is important that the company is grounded in their real-life experience and academic strengths.

3. Production (pre-task) phase: Have the learners choose a company/institution

and research ten good and bad points about it and if they would like to pursue employment there once they graduate. In our experience learners will often be quite uncritical about corporations so will need some prompting and examples. Work-related issues such as salary, management style, overtime, gender equality at executive and management level etc. should be easier to grasp, while social issues such as corporate responsibility, pollution, tax payment, working conditions in developed and developing countries etc. may not be. Learners can be quite naïve at times and often have a universal fondness for all things Disney. Therefore, it would seem sensible to use this as an example to problematize and deconstruct this image to encourage them to be more critical of corporations in the future. As Tracy (1999) points out, the 'Disney Company profits from a global division of labour, from automated processes of production, and from a labour force that is chiefly female for the production of its cultural commodities'(p. 386). It is also easy to find comprehensible information online about the vast pay disparity between white-collar management and service sector staff at their theme parks and how so many workers, especially in America, often struggle to afford basic services. These examples are certainly not unique to Disney and will, with some casual research, be found to be representative of most large multinational corporations (Tracy, 1999). However, while one of the goals in this class is to raise our learners' criticality of corporations, it must be made clear that most of the ten points should have a connection to the learners real lives and if they want to actually work for that company in the future.

4. Performance: Once the learners have around ten good and bad points regarding the company and have a conclusion if they want to work there in the future, they can be split into groups and prompted to present their findings and ask each other questions.

5. Examples and feedback: Once again, an example could be encouraged from some or all of the groups and teacher feedback could add extra information or provide advice, especially if the examples are too timid and perhaps do not include enough critical content.

6. Potential post task assignment: For us, private corporate power and the imperative for continual economic growth and profit is an unsustainable philosophy through which to drive a society. There is limited space in this article to expand on these beliefs in the detail we would like to, however, this lesson provides the platform for many fruitful, both serious and casual, critical and more descriptive, further class activities and homework exercises.

5. FURTHER IDEAS

It is a shame that we do not have more space to describe various other lessons plans which could also raise the awareness and criticality of social and environmental issues. However, here are a few other brief ideas: choose a news story and learn how to discuss it and be critical of it (Using BreakingNewsEnglish.com, BBC, The Guardian, depending on the class level), choose a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), learn about it and consider the limitations of it, choose an individual (Greta Thunberg, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela etc.) and research about the positive (or even negative) aspects of their life. We also teach a gender inequality lesson focusing on contemporary

working culture in Japan to attempt to raise awareness and empower them in the future. Perhaps this could be described in more detail in a forthcoming paper.

6. CONCLUSION

With climate change and income and wealth disparity reaching unprecedented levels the world is facing various extreme environmental and social issues. Acquiring English as a tool to enhance our learners' academic achievement and professional development is admirable in itself. However, if we do not endeavour to also raise learners' criticality and consciousness of these fundamental problems, there may be no fit planet remaining for us and our children in the future. It is not necessary for university English teachers to write papers such as this or conduct laborious, statistically laden research into their own practice. However, we would say that it is essential to keep one's eyes, ears, and mind open, not just repeat the same tried and tested tropes, but constantly reevaluate and evolve your own personal theory of practice (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). In the changing times in which we live it is not enough to hide behind the 'correct' answers in a textbook or merely 'teach to the test'. We must seek to inspire, empower and connect the social and environmental reality of a world in peril to the lives of our learners inside the classroom.

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