



Should We Talk About Global Issues in the ELT Classroom? A Facebook Debate



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At the IATEFL 2014 conference in Harrogate, England, ELT expert Ken Wilson gave a talk on the theme: "Can Global Issues provide context and authenticity in English teaching?" To elicit teacher comments, he held a Facebook debate. Below are sample comments edited for space.

Introduction

I was very excited to kick off the Global Issues SIG day at IATEFL and wanted to include thoughts from teachers by asking about the relevance and importance of Global Issues (famine, climate change, war, etc.) in the ELT classroom. My first question was taken from an article by Mandala Arfa Kaboodvaan in *English Teaching Professional* magazine – 'Is it part of the duties of a language teacher to include socially responsible topics in their classes?' I suppose it's no surprise that most people who responded were in favour of the idea. Some interesting comments were made.

- Ken Wilson

Nina EnglishBrno I absolutely agree!! Why not talk about the world around us instead of sports and celebrity stuff! My global issues I tend to focus on these days are the advantages and disadvantages of emancipation of women and the pill as it affects our relationships these days. We also talk about health choices, vaccinations, etc. These are, of course, based on my personal preferences. That's authentic, right? The students are thrilled and feel they gain much more than just knowledge of grammar and vocab.

Anita Adnan I think it IS important that teachers include global issues in ESL classes because learners can relate to everyday news. In my own lessons, we normally have one hour weekly to talk about current global issues. It gives the power to the learners by having something to say – and most of them have a lot to say! We then relate it language work – such as vocabulary and casual phrases, agreeing and disagreeing.

Nina EnglishBrno However, when going global I feel it needs to be connected to the lives we are living in our communities... so I'd always start with personal experience of the students.

Anita Adnan Totally agree – students relate better if issues are connected to them. Women's issues are among the favourite topics in my class, too.

Jasmina Arsenijevic As it comes to authenticity, are we talking about the teacher being authentic, or something else?

Ken Wilson What I have in mind is whether dealing with global issues in whatever form – downloading information, watching news broadcasts, discussion – represents an aspect of 'authentic material' that everyone agrees is so important in ELT activities. The best that a coursebook can do in terms of global issues authentic texts (GIAM) are news items which may be 5 years old when the class reads them, so clearly coursebooks are not a reliable source of GIAM.

Barbara Bujtás There is something beyond using news broadcasts as authentic materials. A great deal of global issues is a result of global ignorance, global false stereotypes and so on. This is something traditional coursebooks can't cater for.

Andrew Wickham I don't think you can impose any rules here. I guess our main obligation is to make sure students are learning and after that, each to his own. Who is to decide which issues are acceptable or not, socially responsible or not? That said, using global issues and current events to stimulate discussion and interaction in class is obviously a good idea. The more the content is relevant to people's lives, the more it will engage them and the better they will learn.

Branka Dečković Sure it represents an aspect of "authentic material", and it is important to incorporate global issues in ELT classroom. Students like to talk about these issues and express their opinions. My students said "I like when we discuss something where we're supposed to tell our opinion... so we can make a real conversation." "Maybe the best motivation for me is when we use our knowledge for higher goals."

Michael Harrison Language doesn't exist in a bubble, so avoiding topics like this seems to make little sense. I think that we actually have a duty sometimes to bring them up as students can have very sheltered experiences. I'm interested in the fact that you have only given examples depending on resources (famine, war, climate change, etc.). What about addressing equality issues, such as those which affect people who identify as LGBT?

Ken Wilson My actual global issues list is a lot longer than that. Here's the starter list:

- climate change / global warming
- air and water pollution
- military spending
- ethnic conflict
- financial crises
- loss of biodiversity
- poverty
- racism / ultra-nationalism
- attitudes to minorities / sexual orientation
- famine and water shortage

Andrew Wickham I think we have to be careful. Everyone has a responsibility to contribute to society, and there should be no taboo subjects but trying to preach a certain view of the world to students – the one we happen to think is right – listing which subjects are acceptable for discussion – is opening a can of worms. Very soon the pro-lifers, pro-families, pro-natives, etc. are likely to step into the breach and do the same – and what can we say to counter them? So I guess all subjects are fair game, there are no taboos, but let's steer clear of the temptation to proselytise.

Natalia Belousova The list of global issue topics is endless, and I do believe there should be at least some space for them in the ELT classroom. First of all, students like discussing 'real life' as it allows them to express their own opinions and feel the freedom of talking about what matters to them in L2. Using authentic materials also helps students understand that the classroom is not an isolated world having nothing to do with what's going on. My biggest fear of using only textbooks is that students may lose touch with the real world and be unable to use English outside the classroom.

Barbara Bujtás Exploiting authentic news with older teens or adults is okay, the engagement level soars, they love taking up arguments for and against a certain issue or standpoint, but they stay quite far from that particular war or famine, sort of preaching from a distance. It can obviously trigger engagement, but this is only for the sake of the joy of the clash in the classroom, presenting their own opinion and enjoying the feeling of glory of having one. This is very far from the given issue. News broadcasts are still pretty 'cold' in a way.

An example: I was working in a school and we were to have an exchange teacher from Indonesia. For a conversation starter, I put on my scarf like a hijab and entered the classroom, watching the reactions. Then I told them about the Indonesian teacher and that she'd probably be

wearing one of these. Then the 'bad guy on duty' started the "I-hate-them-all-suicide-bombers-riding-camels" stuff. Even one of the teachers expressed her "aversion to people from certain distant cultures." It took them a couple of weeks and a real flesh and blood Indonesian to see the fellow-human. Now they know where Indonesia is, know what the word 'muslim' means, grin in FB photos with someone wearing a hijab. Without this, they'd always stay a cold distance of the news from or about Indonesia.

Or I could mention the 6-year-old girl who started out as 'I hate Brazilians, they are all stupid' (having watched a handball match) and other stories... Nowadays one doesn't need to fly across the world to get closer. There should be course books with customizable tasks designed to exploit Skype calls or Google hangouts with people in far away countries. English is a lingua franca.

Grzegorz Śpiewak I am a touch hesitant about the word "duties" – there is so much on the teachers' plate already that trying to impose yet another "duty" on them, however commendable the intention, is perhaps a controversial strategy. I'd consider "raising awareness".

Michael Harrison I think a big thing to consider when tackling these topics is how to make students aware of the difference between opinions and facts.

Natalia Belousova I think the problem is that we sometimes can't differentiate between opinions and facts ourselves! It's getting more and more complicated nowadays. In my opinion, though, it's really useful to encourage students to read/listen and analyse both opinions and facts.

Michael Harrison What I meant by opinions and facts was more regarding students' reactions to such topics, e.g. the religious student who says 'being gay is a sin'. That's not a fact.

Jean Sciberras It depends very much on the students. Younger students (late teens) strangely enough like to discuss serious topics, but then you come across older students who come to Malta for a 2/3 week course/holiday who want their lessons to be a distraction from their every day problems.

Lynda Steyne I see it as part of a teacher's calling to provide a safe place in which to discuss the hard questions and facilitate understanding and respect for others. Dealing with the ugly bits of life like war, poverty, famine, sex trafficking, slavery...that's not my duty, but my calling as an educator. Of what use are my students' English skills if they are ignorant of the world?

Sharon Nosely-Kallandzhs I've noticed that textbooks always cover environment/globalization /art /culture, etc. as these topics come up in exams. To be honest, students are not that interested as they believe such issues are important but have been 'flogged to death' in course books and exams...Now, if we turn to religion, culture, war or conflicts and allow them to personalise the issue, I can't stop them discussing, debating and eventually 'seeing the world from another person's eyes'. That for me is what teaching multi-lingual classes is all about and hopefully this leads to some understanding of each other, reduces tension and creates mutual understanding. If such issues had been discussed in classes a long time ago, maybe there would be more racial harmony now.

Christina Rebuffet-Broadus Working with adults who need English for professional reasons is not the same as working with adults learning English because they want to widen their linguistic horizons. I've had adults in training specifically say that they didn't want to talk about the news or debate controversial topics but just wanted to learn how to do specific tasks in English. I agree that part of our teaching should include lessons that take language out of the classroom (or bring the real world in), as these can be some of the most engaging lessons IF students get into the subject and feel concerned. If not, they can just get bored and frustrated because we're asking them to think about and give opinions on issues they don't care about (whether they should is another question). Playing devil's advocate: is it maybe because sometimes we feel it's our 'duty' to address global issues in our classes that some students feel disappointed/bored/disengaged? Would they rather learn how to function in English (for travel, etc.) than learn how to argue about gay marriage rights?

Michael Harrison Adults being trained in English for business or specific tasks need exposing to as much different stuff as possible. They're NEVER going to come across a person who has a different opinion to them?? Unlikely. And if they never do, what a boring life. I don't think teachers should go in blindly and introduce texts that talk about gay rights (for example), but how can you ignore these issues?? It's part of life.

Andrew Wickham Shouldn't we remember we don't necessarily hold the truth, nor have a moral duty to foist our beliefs on our students, especially adult learners? There's always the danger for teachers (because we are engaged in "imparting knowledge" and because students tend to behave like a captive audience) to go beyond our area of

expertise and unconsciously think we know more than our students about life, the universe and everything. I always remember what one skilled group of professionals said to me after I took over the class from a teacher they no longer wanted. They asked her to stop treating them as if they were children who didn't know anything – the teacher replied "Oh but in English, I consider you ARE children". It's the same hubris that leads teachers with no experience of business or public speaking to tell professionals who are specialist negotiators and presenters how to negotiate or make a presentation (having read about it in some textbook). It's where that saying "Those who can, do, those who can't, teach" comes from probably. That doesn't preclude our role as citizens of this topsy-turvy planet to share our views with other consenting adults and stand up for what we believe, but we should avoid confusing it with our teaching role and be aware of the age-old temptation of the teaching profession to evolve into a priesthood.

Michael Harrison I didn't mean we should impose our beliefs on the people we teach. I detest people who try to force their beliefs on me. I'll respect and defend your right to your opinion or belief, but not if you try and force that opinion or belief on me. Simply, I think we should give the people we teach the tools to understand, appreciate and articulate different opinions.

Arthur Schopenhauer In terms of choosing the topics, I tend to let the students choose. Or if you use the news, you can get a range of opinions as the actual factual content is unpredictable.

Ken Wilson I think you're making rather too much of the teacher being the one who expresses her beliefs. It's perfectly possible for a teacher to get a conversation going and keep absolutely silent.

Teresa Doquelli A lot of importance is being given nowadays to critical thinking. Getting students to research issues from multiple view-points will not only get them engaged, but also sharpen their (and our) understanding and tolerance of the existence of different realities. So, my answer is yes, as long as we focus on the skills to approach these issues from a critical, research or project-based 'let's look at all sides' standpoint.

Special thanks to Ken Wilson for allowing this Facebook debate on global issues to be reprinted here. See Ken's website for the complete discussion.

Ken Wilson Website: <r https://kenwilsonelt.wordpress.com >
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