



Human Rights Activities for the Language Classroom by Carol Brutza (Gateway Community College, USA)



Introduction

In honor of the 60th Anniversary of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*, instructors in the Humanities Department of Gateway Community College in New Haven, Connecticut discussed how we could embed human rights (HR) lessons throughout our curriculum in ESL, English, and Communications. The goal of these lessons is to bring awareness to our students about the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* document and its application to their lives. Below are a few of the lessons we used.

1. Speaking and Listening Strategies

- ◆ *Connecting Movement and Voice* (while threading a human rights theme)
- ◆ *Speed Topicking* (generating topics, associative thinking, and understanding class audience)

To generate human rights topic, begin with a list:

Something I have done....
Something I want to do....
Something I believe...
Something I want to know more about....
Something I want to change....
Someone I admire....

After completing their lists, students stand up and form equal inner and outer circles. Then the *Speed Topicking* begins. Students rotate clockwise and counter clockwise within the circles. Student then read their lists to each other for a few minutes until they are instructed to "Move!" At this point the students rotate again. Eventually, all students speak to everyone in the class, including the instructor who is very much a part of the wheels.

As instructors, we have found that students become increasingly confident and conversational in telling their stories over and over again. The lists are shortly thrown away, and each time the students re-tell their stories, they elaborate, including more and more details.

2. Reading and Discussing the International Declaration of Human Rights (content, grammar use, structure)

First, hand out or post online to the class a copy of

the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Have students read this document and underline the **passive voice**. They should do this for the next class. In class, break them up into small groups and have them compare what they have underlined. Ask students some of the following questions:

1. Who is doing the action?
2. Are the sentences precise and connected to content? Why or why not?
3. Whose responsibility is it for the 30 articles to be carried out?
4. What is the specific language that is used about responsibility?

Then students research someone or a group they know from their native country or their U.S. community who has worked for human rights. Connect this person or group to specific articles in the HR document and describe what this person or group has done specifically.

Students next write a one-page summary of the results of their research. This is also a good opportunity for them to practice summary writing. Then have students prepare a **one-minute oral speech** about this person. They should include in their speeches some kind of visual: a picture of the person, place, map or object.

Instructors can videotape these short speeches and create a Human Rights Video that can be posted on the class webpage. Or, if these resources are not available, student summaries or videos can go into a Class HR electronic portfolio, which can be filled with all class assignments and activities both in and outside of class.

3. Human Rights Portfolio (using technology, building portfolios, autobiographies)

Students, individually or as a class, can keep an ongoing electronic portfolio of class assignments, essays, photos, websites, videos and movies they have watched, lectures and conferences they have attended, newspaper articles they have read and online research they have done relating to HR as well as how they have participated in their children's schools, churches, demonstrations and local community events. These portfolios become an autobiography of their HR story. Also, they have documentation to include in future resumes.

4. Commencement Speeches (verbal and non-verbal, energy and enthusiasm, congruence)

Have students research university commencement speeches which focus on the topic of human rights. They choose one short paragraph of a speech, practice it orally, then act it out for the class. Next, they write their own short commencement speech and deliver it to the class. These speeches can be videotaped, uploaded to the class website, downloaded to use in class or put into students' individual Human Rights Portfolios.

- ◆ Sample on-line resources: YouTube, American Rhetoric.com, 100 Great Speeches

5. Out-of-class Fieldwork

Ten ESL students from our program attended "Fulfilling the Promise of Human Rights: the Universal Declaration at 60" a statewide conference marking the 60th anniversary of the UDHR on December 6, 2008 at Quinnipiac University, Hamden, Ct. Reflections and pictures of the Day's event went into their HR portfolios.

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On Uighurs, Hans and Racial Attitudes in China

The following comments were posted by a China-based EFL teacher on journalist James Fallows website for "The Atlantic" magazine. They point to one underlying cause of the recent clashes in Xinjiang.

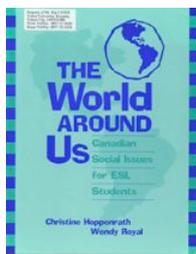
http://jamesfallows.theatlantic.com/archives/2009/07/on_general_racial_attitudes_in.php

"No Uighurs" signs are pretty common in China. Many advertisements for foreign English teachers will include something like "Whites only" or a "Looking for Caucasian teachers" sentence somewhere in the text. Additionally, many native speakers have flown from their country to China only to find upon arrival that, regardless of the applicant's qualifications, the job could only be performed by a white person. At these times, the Chinese are usually polite and a little embarrassed (most Chinese are very nice people and mean no harm), but they will remain very firm in their conviction that a person with darker skin than theirs could not possibly make a good teacher.

I have experienced this on a number of occasions. But after living in China for a while, I realized that what we would consider racism in the West is simply a deeply ingrained cultural characteristic of mainland Chinese people. White skin (the Chinese like to consider themselves white) or being a Han (the dominant ethnic group) means a person is good. Dark skin or not being Han means a person is inferior (and more likely to be a bad guy/a thief/incompetent etc.). It does not equal KKK style hatred. It does not even mean a Han Chinese wouldn't be friends with a person from India or Africa. It simply means that if a person is non-white or a member of certain Chinese minorities, they simply are to be considered less smart, less competent and less trustworthy than the average white person or Han. [James Fallows: This accords with my observation, with the caveat that I have observed this as a middle aged white guy. Early discussions of Obama in China fit this pattern, but changed after he took office.]

On a lighter note, the Chinese are not inflexible and when exposed to nice people of color they usually change their minds quickly. However, the tendency towards ethnic and racial chauvinism is a current running through Chinese culture that is unlikely to change anytime soon. "Truths" are rarely challenged here.

[For details of the Xinjiang riots, go to Wikipedia "July 2009 Urumqi riots"]



Wendy Royal's classic Canadian textbook "The World Around Us: Social Issues for ESL Students" is available for purchase in Japan. The book's 10 chapters cover topics such as intercultural marriage, youth violence, single sex schools, alternatives to prison, euthanasia, abortion, AIDS, poverty, media bias and predicting the future. Cost per book (shipping included) is 2,500 yen (US \$25). Buy your own copy or get a class set! To order:

- ◆ In Japan or Asia: contact Kip Cates <kcates@rstu.jp>
- ◆ In North America: contact Wendy Royal <>wendyroyal@hotmail.com>