



Think, Share, Act: EFL Projects for Social Justice by Nuria Villalobos Ulate & Olga Chaves Carballo (Costa Rica)



The inspiration

Since its beginnings in 1973, the *Escuela de Literatura y Ciencias del Lenguaje* (ELCL) at Universidad Nacional (UNA) in Costa Rica has had an outstanding role in the education and preparation of professionals in the areas of linguistics, literature, language teaching, and translation. However, unless students choose to explore areas other than linguistics, global issues in English courses are mainly used for discussions in oral expression classes. Nevertheless, critical thinking and reflective activities are supposed to be carried out by professors in the courses of all majors in order to comply with the university's overarching goals of social responsibility. At the same time, there is an underlying assumption that global issues are to be exclusively included in the social sciences majors (Sociology, Journalism, International Relations, and others).

Traditionally, students arrive to the English class with certain expectations about how to learn the language, which are basically related to linguistic components. Likewise, professors in EFL/ESL programs often concentrate on the development of the different language skills and on the achievement of the learners' linguistic competence. Frequently observed as an occasion for cultural exchange and for better and increased opportunities to find a well-paid job, English teaching and learning are not commonly viewed as a tool to make the world a better place. As a matter of fact, governments around the world perceive English teaching programs as a way to account for the recent demand for English teaching professionals.

English for Humanitarian Purposes

Nonetheless, speaking English can be the road to reach higher ideals. It can provide access and power to communicate a message of humanitarian issues; it can allow educators to teach learners to grow up as kind, responsible, aware human beings; it can encourage students with the opportunity to make a difference in society.

Students need to understand themselves, their own social and emotional, and then to see them in relation to their interactions with others. By this we mean individuals seeing themselves in relation to what they are able to do within, and for the community, rather than simply in relation to their own personal goals and achievements (Pitt, 1998).

Learners should be given the opportunity to explore their inner potential to respond to this quest, and educators can set up the necessary conditions to make this happen. Indeed, professors first need to become agents of educational renewal and actively get involved in critical analysis, reflection and creative response to their teaching. With this initiative, educators can inspire colleagues to follow these first steps and make a difference in guiding learners to include social reform as part of their learning and understanding of the world. In this way, professors empower themselves so that their students can construct their own learning and experiences. As Freire (2005) states in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist, and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. (p.80)

In fact, education is a profession in which renewal of individuals is required to maintain and increase its vigor and artistry. Teaching professionals must strive for lifelong learning in order to strengthen their professional knowledge, methodology and attitudes towards implementing critical pedagogy in the language classroom.

The TSA Project

The *Think, Share Act* project (TSA) was created by UNA professors Nuria Villalobos Ulate, Olga Chaves Carballo and Ana Solano Campos in 2009, with the aim of becoming agents of change in the field of education by seeking to change students' attitudes towards a way of becoming social advocates, using English. Its objective is for both professors and students to develop ideas in order to improve Costa Rican society while becoming more aware of the needs of other people; therefore enhancing sensitivity, leadership, decision-making and motivation to take action.

TSA students who take English courses are encouraged to form groups and select a social issue of their interest, followed by research and fieldwork that is showcased in a student-created documentary. The journey starts by prompting learners to reflect on

global issues such as poverty, discrimination, violence, human rights and environmental sustainability through discussions, debates, round tables and role plays. As learners' social awareness increases, the students in groups start thinking about a social issue they want to work on. In order to find more information, they use different sources such as the Internet, books, magazines, newspapers, interviews and surveys.

Student Action Plans

Students then design a proposal with an action plan to implement ways to make a change regarding the social concern they have chosen. Along with this, students create a name for their project, a logo and a slogan that can identify its main objective. Once the students start working on their social justice projects, they document their participation in different activities through pictures, video clips, notes, interviews, surveys, and the like. Some of the projects carried out have dealt with teaching human and children's rights in a kindergarten, making a campaign to recycle paper on the university campus, helping children at schools and child care centers, teaching English at an orphanage, giving financial support to families and sharing with the elderly at a nursing home.

With all this material, students create a ten-minute documentary, in English, in which they narrate their experiences, challenges and insights. In these videos, the students introduce themselves, comment on their efforts and contributions, and discuss the challenges and accomplishments they encountered while conducting their projects. At the same time, professors guide the students' work by keeping track of oral presentations, project advances and written reports, photos, video clips, letters and other documents.

TSA Gatherings and Reports

To encourage and guide learners towards becoming social change agents, co-curricular activities in the form of gatherings provide both professors and students with opportunities for reflection. Presentations of personal and group social initiatives, songs, movies and documentaries are some of the activities carried out during these informative, participative and enriching spaces. In this way, students are offered time outside class for practicing English as well as socializing, not only with their classmates but with other students and even professors. In these "Awakening Gatherings", learners also have an opportunity to share what they are doing in their social projects, look for support and motivate others to also become active participants in society.

At the end of the semester, a special Closing

Ceremony is held to present the documentaries the students have created using software such as Windows Movie Maker. The university president, the College dean and vice dean, the English Department faculty, other English students, and even the university sponsors are invited to this important event. Once all the documentaries have been presented, students receive a participation certificate, with a pin from the university, as a reward for their efforts and accomplishments. A feature that makes the TSA a remarkably special and successful project is the joy with which students' effort and work is celebrated at the end of their journeys and the feeling of togetherness, family, and community that this generates.

Concluding Remarks

The *Think, Share, Act* project gives language learners the opportunity to go beyond the customary expectation of using English skills to communicate in the classroom and perform in tests. Instead, they use those skills to communicate a message to the world about their position in regards to the social issues embedded in their projects. Getting an up-close and personal look at each of the issues investigated by themselves and their peers allows students to reflect on the role that social, economic, and political factors have on the realities of those around them.

Student Comments

Overall, students believe that working on a social project brings a new perspective to their lives. They demonstrate satisfaction and pride in their work, and describe the unique lessons they have learned in their own words. Especially insightful are their reflections on how the project "illuminated" their ideas of what higher education is, an indication of the reach of the TSA project.

Social Project: A Lesson of Life

In this semester, in the English course, the teacher told us that we should make a social project. In the beginning I did not want to do it because I thought I did not have time for it, but, when my classmates and I were planning the activity I thought that it was a good experience. When we began to go to San Rafael and we began to know the kids, I was thinking "This is a very different experience for me" because I did not like the kids in this age and I was talking with some of them and they told me a lot of family problems and why they needed to go there. In this moment I learned that the university is not just for studying a major, but for growing as a person.

- María José Jara

“...the most essential thing; it made me a better person. Working with old people taught me values, taught me to be patient, to appreciate the life that I have, to believe that I can make a difference in people’s life and taught me things that nobody could ever teach me in a class, I just learned it by myself.”
- Priscilla

By helping others and working with them for a common cause, students develop deep insights and feelings of respect. Students often build up meaningful, strong bonds with the people, organizations, and communities they work with during their TSA project. They not only read about their quests, but grow to understand and believe in them. In the end, by reaching those who need to be encouraged and who need hope in their lives, UNA students and professors have become part of an active movement that strives to strengthen integration, solidarity and equality in education. As we have come to understand the importance of this initiative, we propose to incorporate these kinds of social project in more course syllabi.

References

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Pitt, J. (1998). Social Justice in education in ‘new times’. Delivered on December 2, 1998 at the Australian Association for Research in Education, Annual Conference. Retrieved July 22 from www.aare.edu.au/98pap/pit98177.htm

This article is based on a presentation given by the authors at the TESOL 2010 conference in Boston.

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TSA “Think, Share, Act”
Teachers and Students Awakening

A project by the professors and students at the Escuela de Literatura y Ciencias del Lenguaje (ELCL) at Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica.

Where **learning English** is more than speaking another language... It is **changing the world!**

Students involved in TSA work on a group project throughout a whole semester. The project consists in finding a social justice issue in communities, schools, neighborhoods, etc. and finding a way to help deal with that issue. During the semester, students research to know more about the causes, consequences, challenges and possible solutions to the social justice issues they selected. They take photos, record videos, do surveys and carry out interviews. At the end of the semester, each group presents a short documentary video highlighting their journey to help those around them. The video not only portrays students' fieldwork, but also their English proficiency.

Students also participate in extra-curricular *Awakening Gatherings* where they reflect on current initiatives to change the world, watch movies in English and meet other TSA groups.

Websites on the Think, Share, Act Project

- For more information on the *Think, Share, Act* project, access its website at: <http://sites.google.com/site/thinkshareact/>
- To view TSA student documentaries, go to: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ClccF52_FxM
www.youtube.com/watch?v=eR74Zxtp35c
- To view the ELCL official website, go to: www.literatura.una.ac.cr/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=20&Itemid=1

E. P. A.
The *Engaged Pedagogy Association* (EPA) includes teachers, activists, trans-lators and students who take a critical reflective approach to education. Subscriptions to its journal are available in both hard copy and on-line. Submission deadline for the next issue is Oct. 31, 2010.

The Journal of Engaged Pedagogy
Spring Issue Vol. 9 No. 1 March 2010 ISSN 1349-0206
Atsuko Tajiri <epajapan@gmail.com> Price: 2,000 yen

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