

Global issues : A communicative activity with integrated grammar*

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“Global issues” has become a buzz word among language teachers. When worldwide problems are adopted in English classes, grammar can be integrated into these areas of study. Since EFL students need to learn grammar, this method may be an effective way to have them think and speak on global problems and develop “output” or “productive interaction” skills. This paper’s challenge is to combine these three fields into one. First, its theoretical background will be explained, and then a practical sample activity will be presented.

1. The Rationale Behind the Global Issues Activity

1.1 Global issues education for Japanese college students

It has been a trend for many language teachers to introduce global issues education in class. However, as they may or may not have noticed, some Japanese college students seem to lack interest in worldwide problems, empathy with other people, and respect for different cultures. This situation cannot be helped if we understand that their purpose of study as a high school student was purely to pass college entrance examinations. The exams are so competitive and severe that they have to study hard solely for their own benefit. They may have acquired the skill to solve questions and problems in a test as correctly and quickly as possible. They may have jammed the knowledge into their brain to make a high score in an exam. How-

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ever, it seems that many of these students may not have put what they have learned into a real-life context. As Anderson states that “beginning university students may never have been encouraged to think about global issues before” (1996, p.20), it seems that they may have not developed a compassionate world-view.

Now that they have entered a college, global issues education needs to be given to help open their eyes to the outside world, think of different cultures and understand different races of people. If practical current information is offered in college classes, it may stimulate student motivation and broaden their global awareness. This kind of college education will help students prepare for their future as a world citizen and for future employment with government bodies, corporations and organizations (Peaty, 1996).

Global education is an area some teachers may have never heard of or may not be familiar with. Some teachers may have been struggling with how to introduce global issues into their classes. Since global issues concern the whole world, English (or other foreign languages) is the main target language to be used.

Therefore, we will quite naturally realize that it is the language educators' job to work in this area. One of the EFL teachers' tasks is to provide both practical English skills and current information on worldwide problems. This will help students develop reflective and independent thought through active participation in global awareness lessons - objectives described by Kevin Mark as “inner global issues” (1993, p.37).

Many of us have become worried about what our Earth will be like in the 21st century. Almost everyday we read, hear about and talk about the destruction of the ozone layer, the greenhouse effect, air pollution, water contamination, deforestation, endangered animals and plants, to label few areas of concern. To cope with these situations, scientists have been making experiments and trying to understand more about both causes and effects. Government officials and

other people related to politics have enforced various laws. Workers and industries have been making efforts to reduce harmful effects on the biosphere. Their work may be small and slow or may have produced no positive results so far, and some of their efforts may be even hypocritical. However, changes need to be made, so language teachers can also participate in this task by giving global issues education to students. They, in turn, it is hoped, will raise their awareness about our Earth in the future.

The key topics for global issues are Human Rights, the Environment, Peace Education, Cross-Cultural Communication and Regional Studies (Yoshimura, 1993). Their specific themes include Discrimination, Literacy, Hunger, Poverty, Saving Energy, Non-Linguistic Communication, Endangered Animals, Garbage Problems, Wars, Refugees, Population Problems, Physically Challenged People, Sex Role Stereotyping, Food and Health Problems, the Destruction of Nature, etc.

As Cates (1997b) states, global issues are gloomy in nature, and many students have negative attitudes about them. Rather, what interests them is speaking English and studying foreign cultures (Kobayashi et al, 1992). It seems true that domestic/international entertainment such as TV games, music, sports, movies are many Japanese students' main interests. However, teachers can start with student interest such as pop music first, and then transform their interest into a global perspective by presenting music containing social concerns such as "We Are The World" (Cates, 1997b). Thus, the first step is to direct the students' eyes to the outside world, and the next step is to gradually promote their knowledge of social issues.

1.2 The importance of grammar for EFL students

Celce-Murcia (1992) claims that grammar plays an important role for EFL students. Within a limited time frame, grammar can serve as a short cut to learn a foreign language. By the age of three to five

native speakers pick up their first language without learning grammar. This is the natural way of mastering a language. But for EFL Japanese students, a large amount of time will be necessary if they study a great number of example sentences, find rules by themselves and acquire them. This is practically impossible since they are surrounded mainly by their first language once they get out of their classroom.

According to one definition by an English dictionary, grammar is “rules of forming words and combining them into sentences” (*Oxford*, 1989, p.542). In survival English, communication may take place by using words or fragmented sentences only. In the basic daily conversation level, speakers may be able to make themselves understood without using grammar as long as they resort to set phrases or sentences. But at advanced levels, they sometimes have to use more complicated sentence structures. They may need to express their feelings and ideas with a more complex sentence organization. Without the correct use of grammar, word order may get mixed up. This can cause misunderstandings. Without the application of grammar, fine subtleties or detailed descriptions may not be accurately conveyed to a listener/reader. It seems that this problem may be true for both “input” aspects of language learning and “output” or “production” areas of English.

In Japan most of the grammatical points are taught at high school. Unfortunately, most of them are forgotten once high school students enter a college. But in many college classes, the students are expected to read professional texts or technical books. Also they are asked to write papers in English. The grammar required in these papers may often be at an advanced level. As Celce-Murcia (1992) claims, grammar plays an important role in the long-term, and students tend to reach a plateau and cannot achieve higher proficiency without learning more grammar.

Therefore teaching grammar should not be neglected even at

colleges. This is not that grammar should be pushed forward and be taught as the main aspects of the English class. Rather, the skills to apply grammar into their academic materials need to be reinforced in English classes. It is obvious that grammar knowledge helps the students understand difficult academic materials and write term papers, essays or theses in a correct way.

Many students tend to think that grammar classes are boring and that grammar is not useful because they fail to relate the learned grammar to speech production even after spending several years studying grammar. Traditionally, grammar has been taught as isolated, separate components in teacher-centered lessons. With this teaching method, two problems may arise. First, some students with passive attitudes will lose their desire to study. They will not find any purpose or meaning for learning grammar. What is taught in grammar class may not be related to their areas of interest. Secondly, grammar acquisition may not even take place. They might forget a grammatical item soon after class, and the grammar is not internalized. Therefore, they have not acquired any functional skills of grammar. As Cates (1997a) states, the most effective way of learning a language is to provide the context of relevant, motivating situation. Therefore, a teacher needs to set up a contextualized setting where grammar is presented in a meaningful way. This enables students to put what they have learned into their own circumstances and to acquire action skills.

1.3 College English classes directed more to “output” or “productive interaction” oriented lessons

Now that several years have passed since communicative English has become the center of many teachers' attention, they may have already introduced lessons using this method into the classroom.

Since it is beyond the work of this paper to elaborate on the definition of communication, our idea of communicative English is

based on the following quote from a dictionary (*Longman*, 1985):

Communication is “the exchange of ideas, information, etc. between two or more persons. In an act of communication there is usually at least one speaker or sender, a message which is transmitted, and a person or persons for whom this message is intended (the receiver)”. ... (p.48).

Instead, we would like to think why communicative English or “productive interaction” oriented lessons needs to be presented in college classes.

First, as English teachers may know, the Japanese Ministry of Education advocated the introduction of communicative English into classes along with a drastic change in curriculum. However, the guidelines do not seem to have offered us satisfactory or specific teaching methods, enough resource materials or practical hands-on activities relevant to Japanese college students. In theory, many teachers’ minds are moving toward communicative English. In practice, however, we are still at the stage where we are struggling to devise communicative teaching by trial and error. In other words, even a small activity, seemingly focusing on communicative English, might be worth trying for our students.

Secondly, as all teachers and most students know, English has become an international language. Nowadays it is said that the number of non-native people using English surpasses that of native speakers. Communicating with foreign people in English is an indispensable skill that Japanese EFL students must acquire. Through the learning of English, they may realize that while one person “holds one view on a certain issue, there may be many views” in many other contexts and that the students will “carefully consider all view points before making a decision or taking action” (Yamashiro, 1996, p.64).

The third point is about students’ needs. Many students wish to improve their speaking skills even though they know that they are in a reading class or a writing class. Widdows and Voller (1991) point

out in their study on the needs of Japanese university students that university English education does not meet their demands for learning speaking and listening skills. This indicates that their main interest is more on speech production and communication with their teacher and other students. One of the teachers' tasks is to know about students' wishes. To meet the students' expectations, various teaching methods and materials should be developed so that the class will be directed to more speaking oriented lessons.

Next, let's consider the nature of college education. Apart from some exceptions, most college students, who are eighteen or above, have supposedly reached maturity mentally and physically. Therefore, they seem to be at the best age to receive "production" oriented English education. It stresses independent thinking and encourages active class participation. In such English classes, they may be able to develop their reflective or critical thinking. If a lot of opportunities are offered, they will be encouraged to speak up, discuss or exchange opinions. This is the skill Japanese college students must acquire in order to communicate with people from around the world. Later, they will encounter many occasions when they are asked to state their own opinions or make presentations outside the college. This ability, therefore, will help them prepare for their futures.

The next point is about college students' attention spans. Teachers with years of teaching experiences may have noticed that many current students have short attention spans. If a class is conducted only with teacher-led education, it may be hard to keep attracting their interest throughout 90-minute lessons. For a change of atmosphere, even a small communication-oriented activity may activate students' dulled spirits. It will refresh their minds. The teacher will feel rewarded when he/she sees smiling students leaving the classroom after a short activity rather than sleepy faces after a lengthy lecture.

Finally, teachers are able to learn a lot from their students through

communicative English lessons. The more a teacher leads the class, the more the students are likely to have passive attitudes. The more a teacher talks, the more students tend to remain silent. They are less likely to express their opinions about their class or texts. On the other hand, many tasks or activities encouraging students' active participation require them to talk and exchange opinions. This gives the teacher a great opportunity to listen to their ideas and understand their feelings about the class. In addition, teacher-student rapport may be created. This, in turn, helps a teacher improve his/her own lessons into ones more appropriate to students' needs.

1.4 Difficult aspects of teaching and learning global issues

While global issues provide students with current information on worldwide problems to broaden their perspectives, the application of this education into a class is not always easy. Those Japanese students who are used to getting correct answers from their teacher may feel uneasy because there are no "good or bad", "right or wrong" answers to many questions challenged in global issues. Those EFL students who do not agree with certain ideas on global problems may feel pressure from the feeling that they are expected to accept their textbook and teachers' ideas (Yamashiro, 1996). Those college students who are reticent might feel hesitant to participate in discussions with their peers and speak up in class. Moreover, as Dyer and Bushell (1996) point out, some students may feel uncomfortable if they are told to examine their own long-held views and cultural values and to transform them into global perspectives which are completely alien to them.

Also there are several difficult aspects on the teachers side. First, collecting information on current events demands a lot of time. Some information is not easily available, and data such as statistics or graphs to be included in teaching materials should be constantly revised. Secondly, selecting a topic that best suits the students'

situations needs careful consideration. Topics such as wars and sex role stereotyping are touchy issues, so that some students may feel challenged or even offended. Thirdly, devising teaching materials that are attractive to students requires a lot of effort and hard work. Materials that have a pedagogical value are not always interesting to students. Next, topics and themes of global issues vary so widely that these are often outside the English teachers' expert knowledge. Every teacher has weak points in other subjects such as politics, geography, etc. Finally, in order to have students take positive and challenging attitudes on global problems, the teachers' role should be changed from a leader to a guide (Yamashiro, 1996). It may be hard for teachers who have adopted traditional teacher-led lessons to switch to an unfamiliar teaching style.

These points may challenge the teacher to be more resourceful and inventive on the latest worldwide troubles. Therefore, it can be said that a global issues class is not only to educate students but also to assist teachers' growth.

1.5 Summary

This paper discussed the importance of global issues education, grammar for EFL students and "output" or "productive interaction" oriented classes. It also discussed some of the difficult aspects on global issues from the students' and teachers' perspectives.

It may be a hard task to combine two of these three points or all of the three to make well integrated teaching materials. But communicative lessons without grammar focus can produce a broken, pidginized language on the student's part (Celce-Murcia & Hilles, 1998). Global issues creating controversy serve as a good stimulant for communication practice (Cates, 1997b) and "easily lead to discussion and debates" (Peaty, 1996, p.5). Furthermore, grammar can best be acquired in a context relevant to students' own lives. In summary the reason for presenting "Global issues : A communicative activity

with integrated grammar” is that these three fields are all interrelated, and it is expected that they can facilitate students’ language acquisition and further global issues awareness.

2. The Presentation of the Activity

To put these above theories into practice, a global issues communicative activity with integrated grammar is presented here. (See the Appendix for the lesson plan of this activity and some sample role-cards). It focuses on basic forms of grammatical items and incorporates them into each theme. This enables English teachers to provide both language instruction and global issues awareness simultaneously in the classroom. It includes 1) practical language skills and current information on global issues, 2) a grammatical item incorporated into a theme, and 3) “output” activities such as discussions and simulations. This activity requires all the students to think, exchange opinions and speak up. It is hoped that this will encourage the students to raise their awareness about global issues and develop critical, reflective and independent thinking skills. This activity is designed to supplement the grammar focus of Japanese college textbooks.

Nowadays nations cannot live without contact with other nations. Therefore, “unicultural education is insufficient preparation for life in a multicultural reality...” (McInnis, 1996, p.6). Peace education may enable Japanese students to broaden their global perspectives into an understanding that all nations are interdependent. Peace education focusing on war and peace, conflict and reconciliation, freedom and confinement, invasion and defense, justice and injustice, independence and subordination, etc. will facilitate their critical thinking “from the two angles” (McInnis, 1996, p.7). They will learn that there are always two or more parties involved in a war/conflict and each side has its own historical experiences, interests and outlook.

The activity is called “Think about other possibilities—World War

II: The Pacific War". This war was the last one Japan was engaged in. In this war Japan was one of the parties involved. A lot of areas were bombed in the inland of Japan as well as in many other locations around the world. There was a great number of casualties in the war. Atom bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Since current Japanese students and many teachers were born after the war, they have no first hand experience and little knowledge about the war. Except for an annual commemoration of W.W. II event held in August in Japan, infrequent media coverage, narrations by middle-aged and senior citizens, and some history classes teaching mainly dates and facts about the war, W.W. II issues generally tend to be pushed into a corner and are largely forgotten in our daily lives. Therefore, it is a challenge to present this activity to Japanese college classes.

As a grammar focus, conditional structures are integrated into this activity. This is because 1) they rank 5th of the most serious teaching problems, 2) they have complex syntax due to two clauses, 3) their meanings are hard to understand (eg. verb with past tense refers to the present in meaning), and 4) the tense systems and modal auxiliaries need to be fully understood before students can use conditionals properly (Celce & Larsen, 1983). Therefore, Japanese students should reinforce their comprehension of conditional sentences even while at college level, though the students already studied them at high school.

The materials should be sufficient to demonstrate the practical application of the principles outlined in this paper. From this point, teachers are encouraged to use their own resources and creativity to present their own original lessons according to the Global Issues criteria. This is an ongoing process in which more suggestions and material will be presented in the future.

References

(used for the theories and the activity)

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Appendix-No. 1

The lesson plan and procedures are presented here :

LESSON PLAN

Activity name : Think about other possibilities-World War II : The
Pacific War

Area of global issues : Peace Education

Objectives : — to introduce peace education on war issues to college
students through card reading and group discussion
— to raise their awareness about world peace
— to facilitate co-operative learning by group work
— to study and review 'conditionals' through the issues
— to encourage independent thinking through the discus-
sion
— to develop an empathy with other people

Skills to be studied : reading, grammar, listening & speaking

Other types of skills to be required : meaning deduction, discussion,
information exchange, critical thinking, & simulation
& opinion formation

Time : 15 20 minutes

Grammatical point : conditional sentences

Class size : about 40 students (each group containing 4 to 6 students,
but flexible as to student/group numbers)

Materials : 7 cards (Card 1-Card 7), each card containing a para-
graph of the passage series on The Pacific War.

Procedure :

'input' lesson :

- 1) The teacher prepares 7 cards, each card containing 'a paragraph about The Pacific War', 'Vocabulary study', 'A comprehension question' & 'Contextual questions'.
- 2) A card is given to each group. Each group studies the card and finds answers.

- 3) The teacher checks their answers to 'A comprehension question'.
 - 4) A couple of minutes are given for paraphrasing their cards. Then each student joins a new group with members of other groups.
 - 5) Every student in the new groups exchanges the paragraph information with each other and rearranges their cards according to chronological order.
 - 6) The teacher checks their answers.
 - 7) The teacher gives a short lesson on the target grammar 'conditional sentences' to the entire class.
- 'productive interaction' :
- 8) Each group has a discussion on each of the 'Contextual questions' from the 7 cards.
 - 9) The answers are presented by each group to the entire class.
 - 10) The teacher gives the final question to the class. The students who take the "Yes" position make a group and move to one side of the classroom. The students who take the "No" position make a group on the other side.
 - 11) The "Yes" group discusses as many 'possible causes of war' as possible. The "No" group discusses as many 'reasons of preventing war' as possible.
 - 12) The answers are presented by both groups to the entire class.
 - 13) A short debate involving everyone. Consensus is not the goal, and there are no right or wrong points of view, only well-reasoned arguments.

Appendix-No. 2

Presented here are some sample cards which may be given to the students for the role-card activity :

Card 1 (Attack on Pearl Harbor)

On December 7th in 1941, Japanese aircraft carriers launched 360 fighters, bombers and torpedo planes in a surprise attack on the

American Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, which finally brought America into the war. The Japanese succeeded in sinking or damaging five battleships and 14 other ships, as well as destroying over 200 aircraft. Japanese forces also struck at Malaya and Hong Kong and a few days later opened a full-scale assault on all Britain's colonial possessions in the Far East, forcing Western nations out of the area.

- 1) Vocabulary study-Study the words and their definitions below.
 - fighters=fast military aircraft designed for attacking other aircraft
 - launch=put something/somebody into action ; to start
 - fleet=a number of warships under one commander-in-chief
 - torpedo=tube-shaped explosive underwater missile launched against ships by submarines, aircraft or surface ships
 - assault=make a sudden violent attack
- 2) A comprehension question-Read the card above and choose an answer from below that best summarizes the passage. Circle the letter.
 - a) American forces attacked the Japanese Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbor, and this was the beginning of the war in the Pacific.
 - b) Japanese forces attacked the Pearl Harbor on December 7th in 1945.
 - c) Japanese forces attacked the American Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbor, and this triggered the beginning of the war in the Pacific.
 - d) American forces expanded their military power into the Far East.
- 3) Contextual questions-Discuss Q-1 & Q-2 with your group members. Write your own answers in full sentence on the lines below.

Q-1 (Past conditional) :

If Japanese forces had attacked an area ungoverned by the U.S.,

not Pearl Harbor, would American forces have entered the war?
Why?

A-1 : Yes/No. They would/would not _____
because _____

Q-2 (Present conditional):

If you had the chance to visit Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, would you
have different feelings than you had before taking the class?

A-2 : I will _____

Card 7 (The atom bombs)

Capitulation was not forthcoming, and Hiroshima was devastated by the A-bomb on August 6th in 1945. The Soviet Union declared war on Japan on August 8th, and began to seize Japanese territory. On August 9th, with the original target Kokura obscured by cloud, Nagasaki was laid waste by the bomb. 'Fat Boy' Elements in the Japanese Army resisted moves to surrender and it required an intercession from Emperor Hirohito for the war to be ended ; Japan surrendered on August 14th. General Douglas MacArthur accepted the surrender of the Japanese aboard the Missouri in Tokyo Bay on September 2nd.

1) Vocabulary study Study the words and their definitions below.

- capitulation=surrender to somebody especially on agreed conditions
- forthcoming=going forward
- devastate=completely destroy ; ruin
- seize=capture something ; take
- obscure=not easily or clearly seen
- elements=groups of people that may have differing ideas
- intercession=the act of an intermediary between two people,

groups, countries that cannot agree, trying to help
them settle their differences

• surrender = stop resisting an enemy ; give up

2) A comprehension question-Read the card above and choose an
answer from below that best summarizes the passage. Circle the
letter.

- a) After the Soviet Union dropped the atom bomb on Nagasaki,
Japan surrendered to the Allies.
- b) After the two atom bombs, MacArthur surrendered to the
Soviet Union.
- c) After the atom bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and
Nagasaki, Japan surrendered to the Allies.
- d) After Japan dropped the atom bomb on America, the Allies
surrendered to Japan.

3) Contextual questions-Discuss Q-1 & Q-2 with your group mem-
bers. Write your own answers in full sentence on the lines below.

Q-1 (Past conditional) :

If no atomic bombs had been dropped, would more people or
fewer people have been killed during the war? Why?

A-1 : More/Fewer people would _____
because _____

Q-2 (Present conditional) :

If your friends from overseas came to Japan, would you show
them around Hiroshima or Nagasaki? Why/Why not?

A-2 : I would/would not _____ because _____
