

Introducing Sensitive Issues in ELT Classes of Secondary Schools in Time of Responsible Society

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Raising a child is probably the most gratifying job any of educators will ever have—and one of the toughest. In large part, that is because times have changed. We live in an increasingly complex world that challenges us every day with a wide range of disturbing issues that are difficult for children to understand and for adults to explain. All teachers will inevitably teach about sensitive topics in their classes, especially classes that will deal with international perspectives such international studies and English language teaching (ELT) that occurs in secondary schools in Indonesia. These sensitive topics may range from racism, forced labor or slavery to bullying, sexual orientation, gender biases, poverty, diseases, disaster — and may be completely unexpected. Any topic of a sensitive nature may make even the best of teachers uncomfortable when exploring the topic with students. Despite the emergence of the concept of cross cultural understanding in ELT, but mostly the natural reaction of the English language teachers is often to shy away from difficult or controversial topics, or to approach them from a superficial, strained or half-hearted standpoint, or even try to avoid these topics, leaving the secondary children into confusion as they will face the global challenges for the upcoming years. But many times these topics are crucially important to students' development and awareness of the world and its social, moral, political and civic underpinnings. Students of secondary schools deserve to be taught about these topics in authentic, engaging and purposeful ways. This is the teachers who deal with global development perspective should have foundation in introducing sensitive issues to the children in their classes.

Keywords: sensitive issues, child's development, tolerance, responsible society



As language teachers, especially foreign language teachers, in 21st Century, we live in such critical moment. In this time, in this complex live and society, we face serious global issues of terrorism, ethnic conflict, social inequality, injustice, religious conflicts, racial segregation, and environmental destruction. How can we prepare our students to cope with these problems? What is our responsibility as language teachers in a world of war, poverty, prejudice, and natural destruction/pollution?

It is not easy task to answer those problems but by introducing the learners with the real issues outside the classroom by bring the meaningful content. The task is not even easy as the introduction to such global and sensitive issues into the classroom is still under the debate. The debate should not occur as long the scholars are willing to put their attention toward meaningful learning activities, such as in language learning. The issues are beneficial becoming the base for meaningful classroom discussions as the learning process as well as learning outcome. The learning activities that include authentic content might lead into greater success for the students.

In case of classroom discussion, it is believed to become an effective method for teaching students to how to interact and argue verbally with others both as the teaching instruction and learning outcome (Larson, 2000); it was imperative for developing in the intellectual thinking and communication of the students. This is also believed as one way to accommodate the sensitive issues to the students.

However, as the emergence of such various topics in line with the trend of globalization, the presence of various information become so obvious without any filter both general and the sensitive ones such as racism, forced labor or slavery to bullying, sexual orientation, gender biases, poverty, diseases, disaster; that people might get any information from anywhere just through one click. The presence of controversial issues from different perspectives is inevitable and seems triggering further discussions, arguing, even debate. In such in-depth argumentative discussion and/or debating activities in the classroom, it may lead the students seriously engage

to support their ideas with evidence, where their opinions are subject to challenge by their peers as well as the teacher.

Within the diverse idea coming from the students, the activities may come into controversial or sensitive discussions. For this reason, some teachers seem reluctant to bring such issues in the classroom; this practice sways the purpose of learning into pragmatic paradigm, undermining the concept of the increase of self-awareness and the development of the students' emotional aspects. Of the practices of the teachers in dealing with sensitive issues, despite the potential appearance of such sensitive discussion—as it would be dangerous, intimidating and divisive, controversial issues must be studied in the classroom without the assumption that they are settled in advance or there is only one right answer in matters of dispute—these are some of teachers' attitudes toward the sensitive issues in the classroom as stated by Hess (in Philpott et.al, 2011). The attitudes cover:

1. Denial: Teachers deny that an issue is controversial. When disclosing views the teacher is not taking “sides” but speaking the truth.
2. Privilege: Teachers teach toward a particular perspective.
3. Avoidance: Teachers avoid talking or discussing the topic.
4. Balance: Teachers make sure to include different perspectives about the topic and make sure not to favor one perspective; this the preferred approach to take.

Seeing the complexity of the world, various justifications assert that teachers should stand on the frontline in introducing the sensitive or controversial issues into the classroom. Learning about controversial issues can build skills such as listening, debate, handling conflict, self-awareness, distinguishing between fact and opinion, creative problem solving, critical thinking, ethical reasoning, recognizing bias, evaluating evidence, justifying an argument, logical reasoning, etc. These are critical skills for survival in an increasingly complex world. Equally as important, students develop empathy and a willingness to perceive and understand the interests, beliefs, and viewpoints of others.

The teachers must approach such issues in a spirit of critical inquiry exposing the students to a variety of ideas, even if they are different from their own (NCSS, 2007; Philpott et.al, 2011). Our students should leave school with a clear sense of their rights and responsibilities as citizens. They should also be prepared to challenge injustice and to promote then common good (NCSS, 2010). The “balance” or objective approach in introducing sensitive issues in language or social sciences classes teachers may employ in their classes is through presentations, discussion, and academic debate.

In the case of academic debate, for instance, would be the alternative in introducing the “less tension” argumentation as it consists of three approaches: conciliatory, integrative, and deliberative. These approaches resist the agonistic approach to argument and explore different ways for the students to show that they understand opposing views, can mediate disputes, and discover solutions that will work (Johnson & Moneysmith, 2005). Besides, the adaptation of the approaches by the teachers, knowing the characteristics of the students is also essential (knowledge and cultural background) as Gilbert & Eby (2001) note that the role of student demographics, teaching techniques, service learning, and creating trust and community in the classroom are salient factors in order for instructors to successfully use classroom discussion.

However, several studies in Indonesia showed that teaching controversial issues has been introduced only to college students’ level (Saripudin, 2009; Indrawati, 2012). According to the studies, the application of controversial issues is as a method of teaching a subject, particularly related to major study, not for global issues. The background of the research is to criticize the lecturer’s method to alter from teacher-centered to students-centered to circumvent tediousness. Thus, implementing controversial issues discussion is better initiated in the beginning of school-level since the issues are not only happened to college students’ level but also to all school-levels. The implementation, of course, with different approaches in view of the fact that the thinking skills in each school-levels are different.

Another justification in introducing sensitive issues to the classroom is that in order to make them ready to become responsible society/citizen as they are out of the school. This paper is intended at discussing students at secondary schools as this is the time for them to get to know the social issues, growing their criticality, as well as their empathy toward the phenomena around them. Besides, the focus on employing the sensitive issues in English language teaching (ELT) class is as a means to utilize the topics as the content discussions, both as language learning process as well as learning outcome such as cross-culture understanding, linguistic features, language elements, accommodating sufficient discourse in their communication.

THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH AND BRIDGING DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

This is not such coincident reason that the presence of the teaching of English in Indonesia is required at the secondary level, with four up to six-hour classes per week. This time is also conterminous when the teenagers start having more opportunity to get engaged into broader communities, even with the unlimited access through open sources as well as social media, that they will receive as much as information from various perceptions. In contrast, the nature of these adolescents is mostly curios to the new community, information, *unstable psychology*, sensitive personality. Thus, the proper manner in bringing the sensitive issues in the classroom discussion might help them becoming the more responsible individual as part of the growing and complex society.

The teaching of English in Indonesia is required for secondary schools. There are some major cities in Indonesia as well as international schools where English is taught to the students in early levels. Regarding the presence of the new language in the classroom to the students, at least there are two competences expected that the students should acquire, namely the interpersonal skills and cognitive.

As the students start acquiring new language, they begin to acquire other aspects such as knowledge of the language (linguistic feature), culture, and the way of thinking. The presence of the new language might influence the way they think. This is similar with the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis saying that the way we think and view

the world is determined by our language. If a group of people change how others talk, that changes how they think. If people learn another language, they inadvertently also learn a new way of looking at the world. When bilingual people switch from one language to another, they start thinking differently, too.

In terms of interpersonal skills expected by the curriculum, during the practice of the target language, the students will try to adjust the local culture (native-language culture) to the new culture (target-language culture, in this case is English/Western culture), and vice versa. The differences between the two concepts of cultures require us as language teachers to accommodate the students to have cross-cultural understanding. In terms of cognitive skills, the students having acquired new language will have wider input of knowledge from across the world. This is also the process where the students start comparing the differences and even argue which one the better or the more suitable to certain phenomena.

The role of the teachers, especially English language teachers, is to accommodate the curiosity of the students in terms of the variety of the phenomena, both good and sensitive, by discussing it in the classroom. The discussion is not intended to find which perspective is the better, but on how to encourage the students to search the common ground. On the other hands, the students are encouraged to learn something new, especially about the different perspectives coming from their peers during the classroom. Instead of debating the differences, the teachers should be able to understand with the balance stance toward the diverse culture, between the native culture and the target culture, as well as to the global culture.

The teaching of English and global education

The opportunity to learn English starting secondary level in Indonesia allows the students to get engaged into the global issues, which are inevitably separated with various global problems such as natural, social, economy, even terrorism. These global issues demand us, both the teachers and the students, to become more aware to the issues around us. This condition leads us into the idea on how to empower the learners to become responsible citizen as they are out of the classroom. One of the

ideas is through introducing to those issues, whether they are *common* or sensitive, to the students, and build their understanding toward the global issues.

The idea is in line with the concept of the global language education. As the status of English as lingua franca and this opens the global communication, the emergence of global education in the classroom becomes urgent. The idea of global education aims to enable students to effectively acquire a foreign language while empowering them with the knowledge, skills, and commitment required by world citizens to solve global problems. Global education has been defined as “education which promotes the knowledge, attitudes and skills relevant to living responsibly in a multicultural, interdependent world” (Fisher & Hicks 1985: 8).

The teaching of English might provide wider opportunity for the learners to learn more toward the sensitive issues. As the idea of global education, instead of we are ignorant to the issues, the teaching of English might become the bridge to the international issues. As the interdependency of the countries, the teaching of English might prepare the learners to understand the mutual benefits toward the cooperation among countries.

There are several good reasons why we should care about world problems. One is ethical and personal. Many language teachers find it morally wrong to just stick their heads into their textbooks and pretend these problems do not exist. Another reason concerns our aspirations to be a language-teaching “profession”; the idea that the professions have a moral responsibility to society. Another reason for dealing with global issues in language teaching concerns our status within the field of education that has always recognized its unique responsibility in promoting peace, justice, and tolerance toward diversity. The other significant foundation that the language teachers should have is the UNESCO’s *Linguapax* Project¹.

¹ The name comes from the Latin words *lingua* (language) and *pax* (peace) and refers to a series of seminars dealing with language teaching for international understanding. This project brought together such groups as the International Association of Applied Linguistics, International Association for the Development of Cross-cultural Communication, and World Federation of Modern Language Associations to discuss “Content and Methods of Teaching Foreign Languages and Literature for Peace and International Understanding.”

This idea might also trigger to the reshaping the education paradigm that only features rote memorization, passive learning, examination pressures, and the discouragement of critical thinking. The idea of global education might lead into the “more open” education paradigm where the students are encouraged to deliver their perspectives toward sensitive or controversial issues during the classroom as well as build their understanding, awareness, and respect to the other perspectives.

BRINGING SENSITIVE TOPICS IN A GOOD MANNER

There are various studies that assert the role of language educators as the effective role model in language teaching in bringing the various global issues to become meaningful content to the language learning, as it is stated below that:

“English language teaching has been bedeviled with three perennial problems: the gulf between classroom activities and real life; the separation of ELT from mainstream educational ideas; the lack of content as its subject matter. By making Global Issues a central core of EFL, these problems would be to some extent resolved.” (Maley, 1992)

If the language students are expected truly to become responsible citizens, then such global issues (including the sensitive issues) and the four goals of global education (knowledge, skills, attitudes, and action) must appear explicitly in the field of language teaching curriculum.

Teachers’ preparation in delivering sensitive issues

When conducting a classroom discussion, controversial issues inclusively, a teacher should examine him/herself in regards with the attitude and delivering controversial topics. This is crucial because when teachers cannot explain the satisfying answers regarding controversial issues to the students, they often come with bias point of views (Marchesani & Adams, 1992). The questions such as why the topics should be arisen and how the teacher deals with the students’ different arguments should be initiated as the preparation for teacher who plans controversial topics discussion in the classroom.

It is considered important to have self-reflection first to teachers. Before teaching controversial issues, they should explore who they are and what their stance toward those controversial issues since all backgrounds, experiences, assumptions and

beliefs may have influence to students. The questions might be 1) how the issues influence and increase the understanding of individual; 2) how the issues inform the way individual interacts with those issues; and 3) how the issues influence the way individual behaves in the classroom. By asking these questions, the teacher will understand his/her stance and accommodate unpredictable and stereotyped students' argument. Also, self-reflection is able to prevent biases' point of view (Saphiro, 1999).

The second point is to understand the general characteristics of controversial issues. They are not about to search for the topics in various fields as many as possible, but rather to the technical terms of controversial issues (Claire, 2003).

Analysis or appreciation of the relevant issues	Ethics and values	Considering 'right' and 'good' as well as ethical prescriptive moral force.
	Rights and responsibilities	Considering human's rights and responsibilities is not value free.
	Relevant concepts from economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Considering the resolution of conflicts to not only the desirable outcomes, but also individual or the state who should pay. • Considering that many official decisions and policy hinge on economic concepts of scarce resources, opportunity costs, cost effectiveness and social benefits.
	Prejudice, stereotypes and bias	Allowing recognizing the validity of other people's values and experience.
Recognizing false reasoning and offer sound arguments	Manipulative arguments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making a special case that the basis of information is not strictly relevant • Using false analogies • Ad hominem arguments • Referring to an expert out of context • Polarized arguments • Caricaturing the opponent • Appealing to emotion/tradition/patriotism
		Irrational and illogical thinking

These technical terms also need to be taught to the students. Sometimes students know that some issues happened around them; however they are not able to value them, causing reluctant to deliver or be aware of the issues due to the lack of understanding. This becomes the reason why they are indifferent toward the issues,

and abruptly, involved as the object of the issues unconsciously. By giving these terms, students may develop their thinking skills to value the issues around them and guide them into problem solving skills.

Third, teachers start selecting the topic of controversial issues. There are several considerations in selecting issues topic, for example, students' interest, experience and expertise on issues, the relevance of issues to their students' lives, their students' maturity level; and the significance of the issue to society (Harwood & Hahn, 1990; Phillpot, Sarah, et.al., 2011). Realizing where the students are also becomes one of the key points in selecting the topics (Shapiro, 1999). This activity can be found in students' direct questioning, group discussion, and journal-writing.

Finally, teachers should realize their roles during discussing controversial issues with their students. Harwood (1997) has identified six approaches of the teacher's role in conducting controversial issues. Teachers may choose one of the approaches with the topic and students' age level as the consideration. First, *committed* approach is when the teacher is free to state his/her point of view. Second, *objective or academic* is explaining all possible viewpoints without stating the teacher's stance. *Devil's advocate* is the third approach in which the teacher adopts provocative and oppositional without considering the teacher's viewpoint. Next, *advocate* is presenting all viewpoints followed by teacher's points of view in the end. The fifth point is *impartial chairperson*, presenting all viewpoints from students' discussion or published sources without teacher's point of view. The last, *declared interest*, the teacher present his/her point of view in order to permit the students predict the bias, then provides all points of views as objectively as possible.

Procedures in bringing sensitive topics

There are various procedures in bringing the sensitive issues become meaningful topics for classroom discussions. The procedures may vary from one country to the others; the adjustment to the needs of the students should be considered at the most. The following are some general procedures that might be applied and/or adjusted by the language educators into the teaching and learning process.

1. Setting the Ground Rules

Successful community-building activities in a classroom discussion becomes hard to be achieved if the students feel ashamed of making mistakes, failed to confront with teacher's point of view, and being ridicule (Saphiro, 1999; Kreidler, 1990). Thus, implementing the ground rules before discussing a controversial topic aims to create save environment to students. The simple ground rules can be (Oxfam GB, 2006:6):

- No interruption while one student is talking
- Show respect for the views of others
- Challenge the ideas not the people
- Use appropriate language – no racist or sexist comments
- Allow everyone to express his/her view to ensure that everyone is heard and respected
- Pupils should give reasons why they have a particular view.

Save environment should be determined and established at the first meeting before the classroom discussions. When students feel comfortable in any kind condition in the classroom, particularly for stating disagreement opinion, they will contribute and engage actively in discussion activities. The ground rules can be applied not only for controversial issues topics but also all kinds of discussion.

2. Introducing the Cause of Issues and Developing Resolution Strategies

Students may be given a controversial topic that commonly happened in society. Teen pregnancy, for example, is one of controversial issues in Indonesia and this topic is rarely discussed in the classroom since teen pregnancy, that closely related to pregnancy before marriage, even welfare reform and abortion, is considered ashamed for almost Indonesia citizens (Situmorang, 2003). At this point, students, jointly with the teacher can identify the causes and resolution strategies of this issue and he/she is able to explain how teen pregnancy happened in ethical and understandable ways if the classroom discussion becomes biases. In addition, this procedure allows students to identify different viewpoints, unfairness, react to the need of others and also becomes aware of every action will have consequences.

3. Bringing to the Facts: Introduction to Controversial Issues in Various Media

After conducting a small discussion, this is the time for the students to be introduced to controversial issues in reality by allowing them to read magazines, newspapers and internet websites. The example can be given when the students are asked to watch one of the television programs about a girl who dropouts from school due to financial problem or poverty. This is could be the alternative way to expose controversial issues in reality. This step is also able to encourage them to show their empathy as well as use critical thinking skills since they identify the prejudice and combat it, identify information biases, stereotypes, and increase the sense of justice. (Philpott, Sarah, et. al., 2011)

4. Identifying the Classification of Controversial Topics

Controversial topics can be ranged from local to global concerns. These depend on the themes underlying the topics. The Rice Library Collection Supports (2008) has identified there are at least 12 themes in which familiar to be discussed throughout the world.

- Economy (student aid/student debt, textbook prices, etc.)
- Family and relationship (social networking, teen sex or unwed pregnancy, transgender issues, mother's movement, juvenile delinquency, etc.)
- Education (no child left behind, standardized testing, gender and learning, religion in schools, sex education, bullying, etc.)
- Employment (Teaching shortage, welfare reform, diversity in the workplace, nursing shortage, Occupy Movement, etc.)
- Rights (race, gun control debate, freedom of speech, etc.)
- Ethics (hunting controversies, teen sex, right to die, etc.)
- Technology (cyber socializing, online games, identity theft, internet privacy, music downloading, etc.)
- Religion (new religious movements, religion in schools, understanding Islam, rise of Mega churches, sexual abuse and the clergy, etc.)
- Violence and crime (gun violence, DNA and crime, domestic violence, date rape, high-tech crime, sex, violence, and the media, child abuse, etc.)
- Politics/law (Iraq war, illegal immigration, hating America, terrorism, homeland security, etc.)

- Health (battling HIV/AIDs, students and stress, cosmetic surgery, food crisis, childhood obesity, youth suicide, autism, food safety, etc.)
- Science (climate change, air pollution, water shortages, saving the oceans, oil production in the 21st century, etc.).

The issues actually are limited into certain domain. The issues might come from other problems that are really new to the social life and have direct effect to the individual or community.

5. Analyzing the Impacts

Investigating the impacts of controversial issues reported by newspapers and television media uses several critical thinking skills such as analysis and processing skills. The students may raise the questions in regards with a disaster issue, for example:

- How does it affect people in your village?
- How does it affect people in Indonesia?
- How does it affect people around the world?
- What are the causes of it?
- What are the solutions to it?

These are the simple questions that can be brought up by teachers. One of the main points of delivering controversial issues is when the students can improve their interpersonal skills at the same time identifying the issue sources, and investigating the problem solving skills through the issues provided.

6. Debating Controversial Issues

The journey into controversial issues discussion cannot be delivered off-handed in the classroom, mainly for secondary school students. Debating controversial issues in diversity society needs critical thinking skills, such as *information-processing skills, reasoning skills, enquiry skills, creative thinking skills, evaluating skills* (Oxfam GB, 2006). According to Jackson's model about teaching diversity (in Marchesani & Adams, 1992), there is connection between students, teachers, teaching methods and course content. Thus, before conducting classroom debate in controversial issues, teachers should apprehend themselves, assist their students to understand their self-esteem, preparing the teaching strategies of controversial issues, and well-prepared course plans. Even though it seems a long way to accomplish, controversial issues

should be introduced to students to prepare them to be responsible citizen in global level.

CONCLUSION

A growing number of language-teaching professionals are finding that global education presents an exciting approach to their work which can promote global awareness, including toward the sensitive or controversial issues. The role of the teachers is not only the agent to accommodate the students to gain their understanding through discussing the sensitive issues in the classroom but also a good self-examiner to clarify their stances in global issues. It is believed that by introducing the sensitive issues into the classroom through discussion or debate in language classes will help the students to gain their awareness, tolerance, empathy, as well as concern to the issues. Besides that, with the more understanding toward the issues, the students could empower themselves to become responsible citizen when they are out of the classroom.

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