Global issues in an advanced conversation class: Language and politics in ELT

Telma Gimenez
Universidade Estadual de Londrina

Francisco Fogaça
Universidade Federal do Paraná

Miriam Metliss

The teaching of English as a foreign language has been experiencing a shift in paradigm that is characterized by its displacement as just another language to be learnt in contexts where an additional language is considered a cultural asset, to become an international language or lingua franca (Pennycook, 1994; Crystal, 1997; Seidlhofer, 2005; Graddol, 2006; Jenkins, 2006, among others). This new status has meant that learning English cannot be restricted to communicative skills to be able to interact with native speakers, a tenet that has permeated the teaching of foreign languages for decades. Nowadays, teachers of English around the world have been called to consider the political implications of their profession. Among the concerns expressed by educators interested in promoting a critical approach to English language teaching is the definition of content and methodology that adequately enable learners to learn that language within an ethical perspective.

One way of addressing this challenge is to incorporate global issues into the classroom, and there is a growing number of organizations and people interested in developing this idea. The availability of websites dedicated to this topic is a clear indication of that interest, as well as the various Special Interest Groups that are linked to teachers' associations, such as the Global Issues SIG of International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL).

However, it is not only in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts that this concern is expressed. Development education in the United Kingdom also has similar purposes. In that context, the Other Worlds Project (2003) introduced the notion of Open Space, i.e. "the idea of a 'pedagogical open space', that is open to all who are willing to look at things from different perspectives, to open up their minds to different (and also partial/incomplete) forms of knowing and being and to the complex nature of the 'system' we are all part of" (Andreotti, 2005, p. 106). The methodology was further developed into another project: Learning about Others, Learning about Ourselves (2004) to which this paper is related and which aims at reporting the experience of introducing elements of Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry (OSDE) methodology (http://www.osdemethodology.org.uk) into an advanced conversation course on global issues in Brazil in 2006.

One of the biggest challenges for teachers working in environments where English is not the mother tongue is how much knowledge of the language is necessary in order to carry out activities related to awareness-raising around interconnected and complex problems. This puts into question the possibility of introducing a global perspective even at early stages of learning, without resorting to the mother tongue only and thus restricting the opportunities for language learning. The challenge for

teachers is how to provide a space for both critical awareness and language development, a challenge taken when we designed the course being reported. We opted to offer it to those who already had some command of the language, i.e., advanced level students. Considerations about the role of linguistic knowledge to the successful completion of the course will be addressed.

First, however, we would like to present our assumptions about the relationship between language and politics in order to justify the approach we adopted in delivering the course.

Language and Politics

Probably one of the most important political experiences is the ability to name and frame issues, i.e. to have the power to establish what matters and what does not in the social arena and the angles for approaching it. For instance, the same phenomenon can be framed as one of poverty and not unfair wealth distribution. The choice of one or the other will set the options available for discussion on what is possible to be done to address it. The name of the problem, of course, also represents a particular worldview that constructs the 'reality'. Usually, politicians and the media are responsible for framing most of the issues for us. They determine the name of the problems and the possible solutions for them. Since naming essentially involves language choices, teachers of language are faced with the great responsibility of enabling learners to consider alternative ways of looking at the same problem. The capacity to name and frame issues by people themselves is, therefore, central to democratic life.

The English language class can join the efforts by providing spaces for reflection on different standpoints and by engaging students in examining their assumptions about the world and thus leading to more reflective views. We can call this 'political literacy' in the language classroom. The concept of political literacy as it refers to using language to make collective decisions or to act together with others needs to be developed in schools in order to raise awareness of the power of language in shaping views of the world and, therefore, affecting one's agency. We perceive political literacy as connected with critical literacy in the sense that both address issues of power and language. However, we use a different term to highlight the explicit link we perceive between democracy and classrooms.

Giroux (2003) argues that "committed educators must learn to respect the lives of young people by addressing important issues such as what schools and other public spheres should accomplish in a democracy and why they fail, and how such a failure can be understood within a broader set of political, economic, spiritual, and cultural relations" (p. 9). In this view, citizenship education goes beyond the classroom walls, to "provide students with possibilities for linking knowledge and social responsibility to the imperatives of a substantive democracy" (Giroux, 2003, p. 9). In addition to that we believe that school practices have to reflect the ideals of this kind of democracy.

The Methodology

In order to provide such a space, we designed a 30 hour course adapting activities suggested by the OSDE methodology that creates opportunities for teachers to introduce global issues in educational contexts, with a focus on critical literacy and independent thinking. This is done through the creation of spaces where learners feel safe to express their own points of views and examine different perspectives. Questions frequently asked in discussions include:

- What could be the assumptions behind the statements?
- How do you think the author understands reality? What could be shaping his/her understanding?
- Who decides (what is real, can be known or needs to be done) in whose name and for whose benefit?
- What could be the implications of his/her claims (past/present/future: social, environmental, economic, etc…)?
- How could these statements be interpreted differently in different contexts?
- What are the sanctioned ignorances (blind spots) and contradictions?

The focus is on assumptions, knowledge production, power, representation and implications. It aims at developing reflexivity (the ability to perceive how assumptions are constructed). One of the key assumptions of the methodology is that knowledge is always partial and context-dependent. Language is ideological and constructs reality. According to Andreotti (2005), "an open space is considered an educational 'safe space' where people are relatively protected from subjugation and can participate in a kind of dialogue that welcomes different ideas and 'critical engagement' with diverse worldviews" (p. 105).

In order to put these principles into practice the suggested procedures, as found on the OSDE website (http://www.osdemethodology.org.uk), are:

1. Engagement with stimulus (prompting cognitive dissonance) & Airing of views – in pairs
2. Informed thinking (where to find out more)
3. Reflexive questions – individually (related to own perspectives)
4. Open Space questions – in small groups (focus on different logics and power + origins and implications of perspectives)
5. Responsible choices – in small groups (decision making processes related to the theme)
6. Debriefing (reflection on learning process and quality of space)

Considering that the OSDE proposal has been implemented in contexts where English is the mother tongue we were interested in introducing it with a group of adults already proficient in the language, i.e. a context where English itself would not be a hindrance to discussion. However, we recognize that by making this decision we were implicitly accepting that global issues can only be discussed under this proposal after a certain level of proficiency is achieved.

The Course

Structure and Organisation

The 30 hour course consisted of ten Saturday classes during approximately three months (from April to June, 2006). The facilitators were two Brazilian university teachers and a British undergraduate student who had already been familiarised with the methodology at the University of Nottingham.

We wanted to have a maximum of fifteen students in the class because we believed that was the ideal number of students so as to have the possibility to build a safe space for discussion, where students could feel free to express their different points of view, challenge their perspectives and have the chance to participate in the class. Nine students completed the course: public school teachers; Law,

Language and Philosophy students; an engineer; and a private school teacher, among others. This provided a mixture of different perspectives and views of the world as well as different ways of constructing meanings and understanding reality as a whole. This proved to be a relevant feature of the course, according to the students themselves.

However, this mixture of different fields of interest happened completely by chance: We advertised an advanced course on global issues, but we provided no information as far as to what language aspects would be taught, or how the topics would be approached. We think the course attracted people who were simply interested in talking about such issues. In fact, we did not plan any focus on specific language items; we had the idea of teaching whatever was relevant to the students and expected grammar questions to stem from the students themselves rather than having a pre-established plan.

After each unit we asked the students to write down their impressions and to answer a few questions (usually three) related to the course, by means of an instrument we called a 'reflective diary'. The answers were handed in to us so that we could have a feedback on the course and take different actions in case we felt it was needed. The questions aimed at making them think whether or not the course and the discussions in class had made them see things differently, whether they had expanded some of their views in the light of other people's opinions and what (if anything) they had learned about the issue.

In the last session they were invited to write down their overall impressions on the course and think whether they had learned anything about themselves, about others and about global issues. We also asked them if they thought the discussions in the course had been different from others they had had before and, if so, how. This was followed by a whole-class discussion about their views on the course, what had worked well, what had to be improved, and whether or not their expectations had been fulfilled. The discussion was transcribed and we attempted to categorize their impressions into a few items. They also completed a self-evaluation form in which they basically analyzed their attitude towards the activities they were involved with in the sessions. The students' opinions have been categorized into different topics and their names have been omitted. They are referred to as S1, S1, S3, and so on.

Topics

In the 'knowledge and perspectives' session students were introduced to the 'open spaces' methodology and background rules (http://www.osdemethodology.org.uk/). The principles were discussed and the moderator informed the students how the classes would be conducted and what was expected from them. We felt this was necessary because students might have different expectations concerning the course content and methods. Furthermore, we assumed that some people might be more resistant to changes and to having their opinions challenged and might engage in quarrels over who is right and who is wrong, which has been the traditional way of discussing political issues.

'Globalization' included a discussion of the many aspects involved in the concept (technology, politics, fashion, information, ideology, neo-liberalism and so on). As a motivational activity, students did a "search-for-someone-who" activity, in which they had to find classmates that had some kind of experience with a foreign product or culture (e.g. someone who had traveled abroad, who was wearing something made in another country, whose family had an imported car, or who had electrical

equipment made in another country, and so on). Then, they discussed some facts and figures related to globalization, such as the number of tourists and people traveling abroad to find jobs. They also talked about some cartoons and compared the meanings they attributed to them. They compared their views on quotes by famous people and institutions concerning aspects of globalization (e.g. George Bush, Jimmy Carter, Bill Gates, Kofi Annan, and the World Bank). The sentences were spread around the classroom walls and students had to walk around and comment on them whenever they found the quotes interesting. They could agree, disagree, partly agree and express their opinions freely. Different views were confronted afterwards. For homework, students were then asked to search the internet (or books) on any aspect concerning globalization and bring their findings to class to share them with their classmates. They formed small groups and shared their research in the following class. Students also watched some scenes of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre (Brazil) in which activists expressed their views and concerns about globalization. Students took notes and discussed the different aspects involved.

"Identity and difference" started with the completion of a repertory grid in which the students had to indicate people they knew and position themselves in relation to them. Afterwards, they read some cartoons which depicted immigration issues, newspaper article and letters to the editor about immigration in the United States, followed by discussions on the views expressed in the texts. After that they had to discuss open-space reflective questions on immigration (its causes, consequences, prejudice, common beliefs and political implications). The students were asked to perform a role-play activity in which they pretended to be members of a committee which had to select people to be admitted into their country as immigrants. Two out of seven applicants had to be rejected, and after the role-play was over the students had to justify their choices (adapted from http://eycb.coe.int/edupack/contents.html).

The "poverty" sessions involved brainstorming the concept of poverty and what is linked to it. Students then analyzed some cartoons portraying the exploitation of the poor by the rich. After that, students read and discussed some paragraphs which attempted to address different aspects concerning poverty (economic structural adjustment, poverty around the world, world hunger, poverty and the internet). The paragraphs were adapted from the Global Issues website (www.globalissues.com). This was followed by a scene from the film Rwanda Hotel, in which the students had to discuss some aspects of the conflict (civil war) in Rwanda. Questions concerning the role rich nations should play in the world and whether or not other nations should interfere in international affairs, such as wars, were discussed. This was followed by open-space questions which challenged students to think about possible links between their lifestyles and issues such as poverty, war and disease in developing countries. Students, were then invited to imagine what kinds of concerns people from different walks of life have in relation to poverty (e.g. a priest, a wealthy businessman, a university teacher, a teenager, a person living in a slum). Finally, students tried to come up with possible actions that could be taken to fight poverty at a world level.

Students' Impressions on the Course

The Creation of a Safe Space

One of the facilitators asked the students whether they felt there was a safe space for them to express their thoughts freely, because we thought this was such a basic principle that if we had failed to provide them with the opportunity to freely express their views and actually own the space, the results of the course would have been hindered. Except for S14, the students agreed that in the beginning it was a little more difficult but that afterwards they felt comfortable.

S14 said that in the beginning it was harder because she did not know everyone and she felt threatened by the group, especially because of her views.

> In the beginning I felt threatened, because I didn't know (…) and when I said something, I think people looked at me and thought "she's crazy" (…). I don't know… In the beginning, it was very hard for me. And during the course I started to (…) talk to people and… know (them) better, it was easier. (S14)

The same student added that she felt a little forced to take a stand and express a point of view she was not ready yet to express, for she felt she needed more time to think. However, the pressure may have come from inside, since the rules did not force anyone to speak.

When asked if they thought that sometimes they were fighting over whose perspective was better or worse, a student said one of the things he learned with the course was that "no one is right or no one is wrong … everyone has something that can be useful" (S7,). That seemed to be a consensus among the group, and each others' opinions were respected.

Then, another question was brought up. One of the purposes of the course was that students could challenge other´s views. However, as they became friends, did they still feel they had the possibility to challenge their views, or maybe they felt as they became closer they all tended to agree on the same things? The students seemed to agree that friendship is not a problem; on the contrary it may even help, as S13 puts it,

> I think friendship helps, because then you fell free to question… and then the other person doesn't feel that you are doing this, you're contesting him for personal reasons (…) if you say something and I say "why is that?" "Say more about that", you know, (…) the idea is to contribute. (S13)

Another point raised was that despite the fact that they were friends, the students had different backgrounds, different experiences in life, and came from different environments. That was very enriching, according to them. One of the students expressed this feeling:

> We are friends, but we have different backgrounds. So that's what helps to have these different ideas…and I think that's what helps more (…) She's a… a teacher from a public school, he's a lawyer, he's an engineer, so, uh… we have different perspectives. (S10)

It is interesting to note that the diversity of backgrounds was identified as responsible for the different perspectives. What if the students had all shared the same professional backgrounds? It would have been important to make sure that the diversity was present, by bringing different voices to the discussion.

Language Learning

The group raised the question of linguistic goals versus learning about global issues goals. As we have already stated earlier in this paper it was not our purpose in the course to teach any specific language item or skill (vocabulary, language patterns, paragraph and essay writing, and so on). The course leaned heavily on classroom discussions, reading and a lot of thinking. Therefore, we wondered whether the students missed having some formal grammar teaching, for instance. They all agreed that for them it was more relevant to learn about global issues than to study discrete grammar points, which could render the classroom an artificial and inadequate discussion forum.

> But I think if you did this (teach grammar) maybe it could become artificial, you know, because even if you make a lot of mistakes, it doesn't matter; we just want to share our ideas (S14)

> I think if you work with vocabulary and you stop a "line of thought"… and say "ok, let's talk about vocabulary, so I forget about what you are saying"… it's like you said: it will be artificial [looking at S14[. (S10)

However, it is not so easy to separate language and content. S14 was an English teacher and she felt that her language proficiency was being judged by the rest of the class, which may have been responsible for her feeling threatened. Language proficiency is often a factor of exclusion in language classes, as what one expresses may also be judged in terms of language accuracy and appropriateness.

Methodology

As far as the methodology adopted, we did follow it quite flexibly, which means we did not try to impose the activities upon the students. For instance, if a certain activity was meant to work as stimulus (motivation) for the unit but turned out to be a deeper discussion about the topic (and took longer than expected) we did not try to stop the discussion just because that was not planned to be that way. Likewise, many times when we got to the reflexive questions or the open-space questions part, those issues had already been discussed throughout the unit and were no longer interesting. So, we felt that we had to be very flexible and sensitive enough to perceive what could work at a certain moment of the class and make the best choices. The students agreed that flexibility was important because otherwise the class could have become artificial.

One aspect that was considered important was the students' own questions, in addition to those proposed by the tutors, which were seen as a starting point, but then the students took control of the discussion, as S13 points out:

> I was thinking that most of the questions were brought to us. We had to start thinking after somebody else's first thoughts; so it was kind of guided. But then I was thinking that this group was not much led by those questions because (after) a few seconds we were discussing

something else (…). You know, in a short time we were talking about something different, completely different. (S13)

The students felt the ability to propose questions themselves was invaluable, since the methodology would be too rigid if followed only the initial questions.

The Course as a Whole

Due to the space limitations, we provide here only the comments made by students in the last session, as we feel they reflect what happened throughout the course. The idea that every perspective is valid and that everyone can contribute to the group was something that stood out for them. The group seemed to have felt free to express their views and to exchange ideas.

Yes, this open spaces kind of discussions is different from all other discussions I took part of. Here there is not an absolute answer, especially in such controversial issues. (S7)

We could discuss our realities in this course. We could talk about problems people usually don't like to talk about. It was a fantastic course. We had people from different backgrounds, and this contributed a lot to the exchange of ideas. (S10)

The freedom to speak, the questions proposed and the topics approach. (S13)

Two other main points were discussed by the students: a) learning about 'others' and about myself; b) learning about global issues.

Learning about 'others' and about myself

More than 80% of those who answered the questionnaire said they learned to respect other people's points of view and that everyone has something relevant to say. They mentioned that as people come from different backgrounds they all see things through different lenses which were built throughout their lives, their history and the environment they grew up in:

Other people's points of view contributed to build some (of my) ideas. By discussing those topics I could learn, I could see how things can be faced in another way. I started respecting others' points of view by considering their habits and their life history. (S10)

All the students pointed out that they had learned something about themselves as well. More than 80% of the students said they now recognize their own limitations and that they should accept that other people's points of view are also valid, as S14 states

I've learned that I have to learn about working in an open space, I mean, learn how to accept others' points of view and try to find a common ground. I have to understand that my point of view is not the best and just it is something that sometimes can help or not. (S14)

Becoming a more confident person, getting rid of preconceived ideas, and the need to read more about the issues discussed in class were also mentioned.

Learning about global issues

As far as learning about global issues is concerned, students' evaluations were very much alike. Students felt they could establish a connection between cause and effect and perceive how global issues affect our lives. Furthermore, they could see that many of the issues they discussed are somehow intertwined and are part of the same problem.

> I've learned that the many different issues are somehow, connected, even when they seem to be totally different. (S7)

> We should be aware of global problems and their origins as they affect all of us. Social injustice and poverty were the most touching issues to me.([S13)

> A lot! I've got a lot of new information and even if I don't know how to deal with it I know that in some way it will be useful to me and to my job. (S14)

Self-evaluation

On the last day of the course, the students were asked to grade themselves (from 1 to 10) according to some items, as specified in the following table. The figures on the right are the average grades students attributed to themselves in each item.

	Average
You gave lots of your own ideas to the group	7.8
You tried to look at things from different perspectives	8.2
You listened to others and even tried to use their ideas	8.3
You built on the ideas of others to change your own	7.7
You did not want to change your ideas	3.3
You wanted to change other people's ideas	6.3
You stayed quiet and watched the rest of the group	2.5
You stayed quiet and thought about something else	2.0
You wanted to sort out the problems and arrive at the answers quickly	4.7
You started arguing because others disagreed with you	5.7
You did not want to do the activities	1.2
You felt free to say everything you wanted to say.	9.7

As we can see the students have a positive idea of their contribution to the course, as the average grade for "giving a lot of their own ideas to the group" was 7.8. They also felt that they were flexible enough to "listen to others" and "build on the ideas of others to change their own". As far as "not willing to change their own ideas", the average grade was 3.3, which shows that they were quite open to new perspectives. They also seemed quite receptive as far as the type of activities was concerned, for only 1.2 was attributed to "did not want to do the activities". We see the items "wanted to change other people's ideas" and "started arguing because others disagreed with you" as part of the challenging perspectives process we expected them to engage in; so, the grades reflect that a little bit, though they still show that they were flexible enough to accept different views.

Discussion

The responses given by the students both in the oral and the written evaluations revealed that the course managed to create a safe space, where almost all the participants felt free to comment on the issues and not be judged. Only one revealed a concern of "not losing face" because of her status as an English language teacher. The connection between command of the language and the ability to participate in this kind of dialogue was visible through her comments, which brings us the need to continue re-examining the relationship between perceptions of one's own language proficiency and participation.

The bonds developed between the participants were also mentioned as a possible cause for the absence of fear. On the other hand, it might also have prevented more challenge to the participants' own views. Social cohesion (respect for each other) may have been considered more important than conflict generated by contrasting opinions.

It was also interesting to note that the tutors were almost invisible in the comments. All the references were made in relation to the other participants and their backgrounds responsible for the diversity the group exhibited. It seems that the group took control over the course, putting forward their own questions about the issues and considering their peers

In terms of language learning, it seems that it was hardly the main objective of the group. The course was seen as relevant for the discussion of important topics and, secondarily, a place to practice the language.

Final remarks

There was a very strong positive response from the students about the impact the course wanted to create. We felt the objectives were achieved in terms of the principles and procedures suggested by OSDE. There were, of course, some adaptations to the steps suggested but that did not affect the methodology itself. The students' evaluation of the course revealed that it was possible to use the English class as a space for the development of an attitude of respect for different viewpoints and willingness to examine one's own opinions. Considering that this is fundamental for the creation of a political culture that values dialogue instead of debate, the results suggest that it is possible to develop political literacy in the language class.

The course also reinforced our perception that some command of the language is a pre-requisite for the successful conduction of the steps suggested by the proponents of the methodology.

References

Andreotti, V. (2005). The other worlds educational project and the challenges and possibilities of 'open spaces'. *Ephemera, 5*(1), 102-115.

Crystal, D. (1997). *English as a global language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Graddol, D. (2006). *English next*. London: British Council.

Jenkins, J. (2006). Current perspectives on teaching world Englishes and English as a lingua franca. *TESOL Quarterly, 40*(1), 157-181.

Pennycook, A. (1994). *The cultural politics of English as an international language.* London: Longman.

Seidlhofer, B. (2005). English as a lingua franca. *ELT Journal, (59)*4, 339-341.